

Lutheran World Federation

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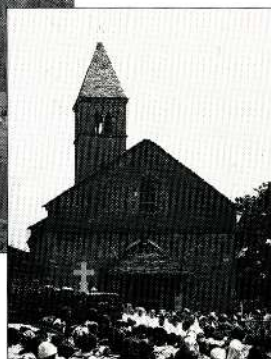
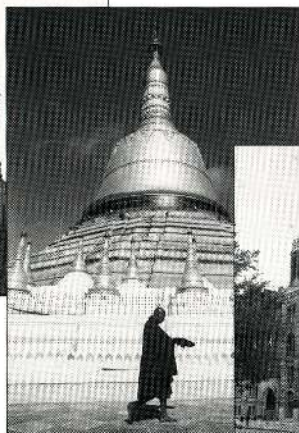
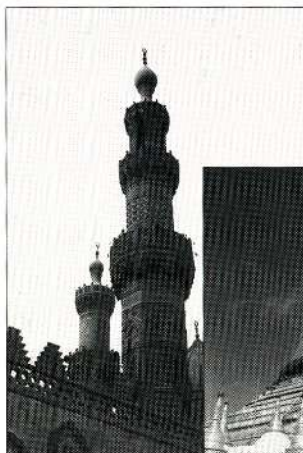
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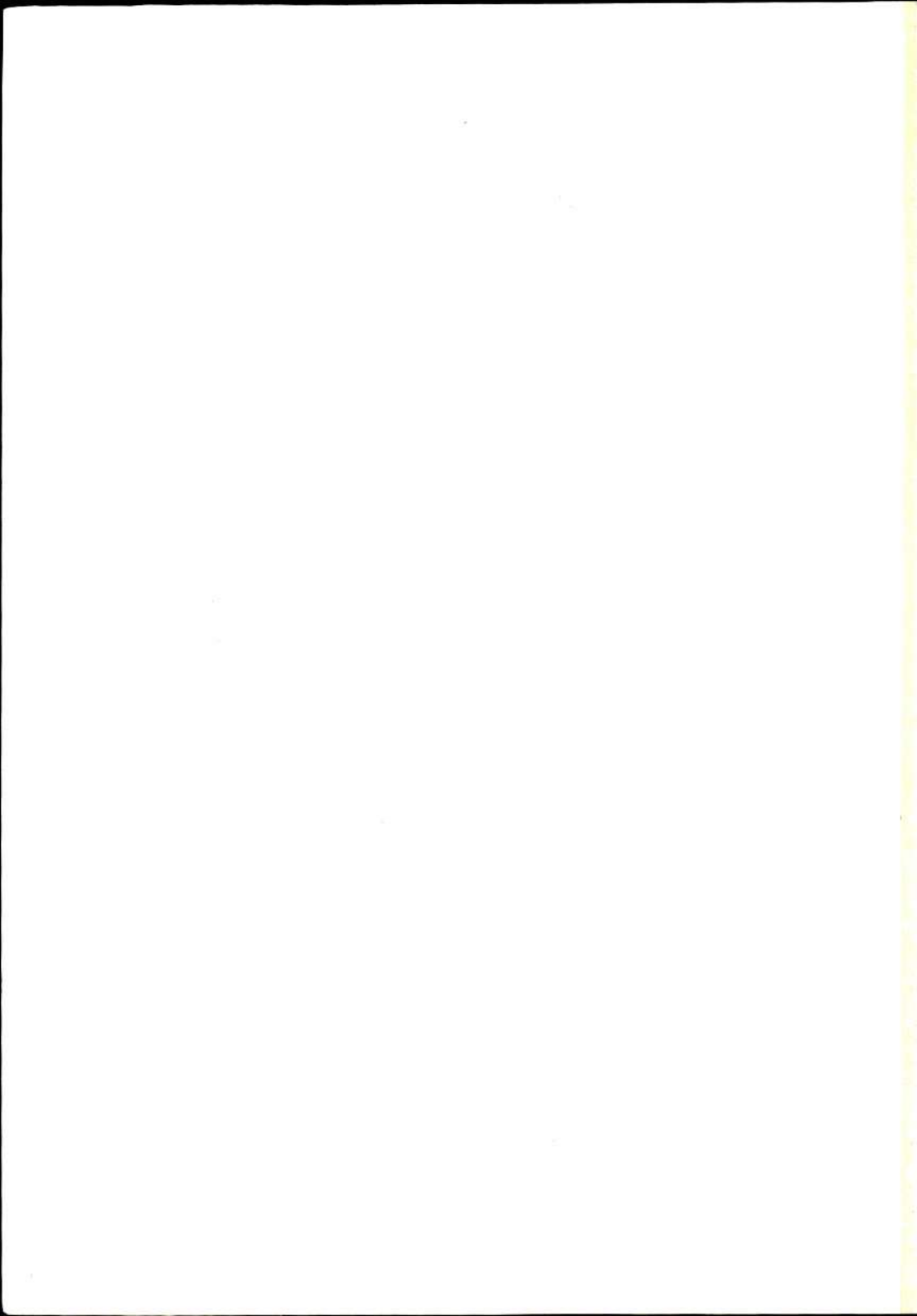
41/1997

THEOLOGICAL

PERSPECTIVES

ON
OTHER
FAITHS





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FOREWORD

Viggo Mortensen

The churches who founded the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1947 had experienced how it was to be in communion and therefore wanted to create a structure which would facilitate their cooperation within that communion. This new structure was built on four pillars: aid to those in distress, commitment to ecumenical cooperation, common engagement in mission, and deepened theological reflection. Today, fifty years after its foundation, the federation still bases its work on these four areas. The needs, however, have changed, but in no way diminished, on the contrary. Also the challenges have changed which confront ecumenical cooperation, mission and theology; the need to meet these challenges with sound theological reflection is felt more than ever.

In 1984, in response to some of these changes in the area of mission, a new desk—namely the one for Church and People of Other Faiths—was created in the then Department of Studies. This in part was a response to the changing situation of Christian mission, but it also signaled a new emphasis in the federation's priorities.

The program "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths" (first conceived by Dr J. Paul Rajashekar, study secretary from 1984 to 1991, and then refocused and carried out by Dr Hance A.O. Mwakabana who had become study secretary in 1992) made it possible for five teams to study the major

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religious traditions encountered by Christian and Lutheran churches worldwide. The results of these studies were presented at a global consultation in 1996 in Bangkok.

I hope that the five summary reports will become a valuable resource for the churches, their agencies and institutions in their dialogue with people of other faiths. There hardly is one single issue that affects the life and witness of the churches more than this one. It is no longer enough to study all faiths academically; for the churches in the Lutheran communion, if not a matter of life and death, it is at least a matter of growth or stagnation, of credibility and relevance to relate to and study these issues.

On the basis of some facts, let me ask a few questions here:

- We are Christians and as such we live with the great commission: “Go . . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . .” (Mt. 28:19f.). *How do we live out this missionary command in this day and age?*
- We live in a multireligious and multicultural world. One may have been able to say that at some point in history, in a specific place, there was a monocultural or monoreligious situation. For a few hundred years, this seems to have been true for Europe and other places, where one religion predominated. But this is no longer so. Today, the multireligious and multicultural situation is—with variations—the global reality. *What is our response to this global reality?*
- Everybody wants to live in peace. But often ethnic, political and social strife are fueled by religious tensions. *How can this program contribute to peace, reconciliation and tolerance?*

Theological
Perspectives
on Other Faiths
*Toward a Christian Theology
of Religions*

Documentation from a consultation held in
Bangkok, 10-13 July 1996

Edited by Hance A.O. Mwakabana

*The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland
Department for Theology and Studies
Desk for Church and People of Other Faiths*

Parallel edition in German:

Andere Religionen aus theologischer Sicht. Auf dem Weg zu einer christlichen Theologie der Religionen

LWF Documentation No. 41, 1997

Layout by Gabrielle de Sola, BTL Productions SA

Editorial assistance: Corinna Ascher, LWF/DTS

Published by the Lutheran World Federation

150, rte de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100

CH – 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

Cover photos by (left to right) Bruce Best/WCC;

Peter Williams/WCC; epd-bild/Krause; John Taylor/WCC.

Printed in Switzerland by SRO Kundig

ISSN 0174-1756

ISBN 3-906706-44-3

- This is a study program of the Lutheran World Federation and therefore the legitimate question must be raised: *Can Lutheranism make a special contribution to interfaith dialogue?*

Let me briefly reflect on some of these facts and questions.

The summary report from the working group on Hinduism says: "It is necessary to recognize that the grounds for evaluating other traditions must come from distinctively Christian sources. However, a responsible theology of religion must approach other religious traditions with sensitivity and understanding. Scornful rejection and friendly embrace can be made with one's eyes shut, or, as is most frequently the case, with preconceived notions little affected by careful study."

We do not want to fall into either of these traps. We are committed to careful study and we must realize that when we are advocating dialogue we are at the core of Christian theology.

There is one image that aptly describes the various facets of contemporary existence. Lacking a monocultural basis from which to speak, we are more or less forced to create a new one, in the form of a patchwork. Many people love the beautiful patchwork quilts made up of different pieces of material. Small pieces come together and out of the parts a new pretty picture is created. The religious personality also often takes the shape of a patchwork. Quite a few people would like to put together a patchwork faith of their own: a little bit of Buddhist meditation, some Hindu spirituality and a good helping of Amerindian nature belief, to which may be added a little Sufi mysticism and Christian symbolism. If there are so many religious truths in the world, would it

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not be best to mix our own cocktail to quench our religious needs of the moment? However, we can do this only if we do not accept the claim to truth made by these religions, and thus, in the end, we are not taking them seriously.

If the way the various religious communities coexist is to be improved, it is essential that Christians and people of other faiths first *gain more knowledge* about their own beliefs and that of the other, a knowledge which they can then contribute to dialogue. If we are to conduct a meaningful dialogue, it is important to supplement the *conviction* that our own religion is true with the will to *affirm* that other religions have the right to exist. A tolerance based on knowledge, conviction and affirmation is in sharp contrast to the claim made by some that theirs is the only true religion, or that they are the majority and can therefore determine the terms of co-existence. Also in everyday life tolerance is the basis for dialogue and co-existence and can lead to an enrichment of one's religious life.

What role does mission play in this encounter? Much depends on what we mean by mission. In every major religion we find people who try to make it attractive to others through the example of their own life and by communicating their belief. Although the term "mission" is not being used, winning others over and convincing them is part of the program. This study project advocates dialogue as a form of mission.

But what about good old proclamation, as known in evangelism? To me, dialogue is not a substitute for evangelism, meant to blur distinctions between Christians and people of other faiths and resulting in syncretism. In true dialogue, the uniqueness of Christ will always be present. It

is exactly a Christ-centered evangelism that leads us onward to dialogue with people of other faiths.

Dialogue is a good biblical word and has often been used as a working tool in Christian apologetics. In the Book of Acts we find the word *dialogomai* nine times, when it is described how Paul not only preached, but reasoned, argued, persuaded and discussed with the people he met and who did not share his faith in the gospel. I do not think we have a better model than the one of Paul on the Areopagus or in other places he visited on his missionary journeys. Our approach must be respectful and humble. We must not only speak, but also listen, while realizing that we are all on the way to new truths.

New challenges keep testing the churches' commitment to dialogue and mission and they have rarely been greater than today. But as they grow, so do the opportunities to deal with them. To me, it seems that the opportunities for mission and dialogue have never been as manifold as now. Today's world is full of international strife, racial hostilities, ethnic enmity, religious wars, moral decay, social conflict and economic deprivation. But at the same time it is crying out for healing, wholeness and reconciliation. It is in this world that the church is called to be the light of the nations and the salt of the earth, to proclaim the gospel in word and sacraments, and to serve people in every kind of need. Let us be faithful to this our calling.

INTRODUCTION: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON OTHER FAITHS

Hance Mwakabana

THE STUDY PROCESS

“Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths,” is the title of the study program initiated by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies’ Desk for Church and People of Other Faiths. Five working groups—on African Religion, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam—were sponsored by this program. The Bangkok consultation was the culmination, one might say, of what the study teams had been working on since 1993. The name of the study project became the theme of the consultation.

With the materials from the working groups, the two lectures on the consultation theme, the group and summary reports which came out of the group and plenary discussions, we attempted to take the initial but necessary step towards developing a theology of religions from a Christian/Lutheran perspective. The guidelines which prompted the groups in their work stipulated that the study of a given tradition should:

- pay adequate attention to both the canonical and popular dimensions;

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- explore concrete Christian encounters with the respective tradition in particular contexts (i.e., including ritual and communal dimensions);
- reflect upon specific theological engagements with the respective tradition, with reference to common Christian, especially Lutheran, affirmations; and
- articulate a proposal for future dialogue with the respective tradition, including its possible contribution to the development of a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions.

Out of the above, we hoped, would emerge certain theological affirmations—common to all traditions in some cases, or to one particular tradition in others—that would serve as basis for developing a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions. They had been categorized as follows:

- Affirmations that would promote a measure of consensus between the Christian faith and the other (religious) tradition(s)—such as in theological, ritual, communal matters, etc.
- Affirmations that would point to significant differences in perspective and context.
- Affirmations that would require further exploration.

The working groups, each in its own working style, responded well to the expressed needs and hopes as contained in the original guidelines of the study project. But, as can be seen from their reports—which are in a way condensed summaries of the more extensive materials contained in the separate research papers produced by each group—each group went well beyond responding to what was stipulated in the guidelines. The general content of the working groups' summary reports is as follows:

- An outline of the nature of the relationships between Christianity and the tradition studied.
- An attempt to understand the religious tradition concerned in the contemporary situation, the main question being: Who are we dealing with? (Who are the adherents to African Religion, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism or Islam?)
- An outline of contemporary concerns about and obstacles to dialogue between Christians and the people of the faith in question.
- Possible areas of theological engagement, at the levels of both theoretical reflection and of concrete encounter in real-life situations.
- Suggestions and recommendations on how the results (including those of this consultation) of the study project could be made use of and implemented at different levels in the LWF member churches—by them alone or in cooperation with other Christian churches and ecumenical partners.

These summary reports were felt to be important and had a strong impact on the general discussion at the consultation as we were wrestling with the question of what a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions should be and how we should go about developing it.

The materials gathered in the course of the study did not in themselves present us with a ready-made theology of religions. They did, however, provide us with valuable sources and materials for developing such a theology. The consultation was designed to make a further contribution to developing a theology of religions. The summary reports, the topics of the discussion groups as well as the lectures which were part

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of the consultation's program, all aimed at contributing towards that goal. It is clear therefore that the results arrived at by the working groups, as well as those of the consultation were not intended to provide a blueprint for a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions to take home for further use. Developing a theology of religions cannot be a one- or two-time exercise, rather it involves a long process. What the working groups and the consultation could hope to achieve was to start the discussion on the subject and provide useful materials for developing a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions—a general outline of what it is and should involve; how it should be developed; its relation to other disciplines and how it could incorporate the results and contributions of these disciplines—e.g., of the history of religions, philosophy of religion and of theology in general.

THE NEED

A Christian/Lutheran theology of religions—what does this mean? It means that this kind of study was undertaken in an attempt to formulate a Christian understanding of other faiths. This meant that we were focusing on theological perspectives on other faiths from a *Christian perspective*. We are Christians—and we enter into the discussion with the hope that in trying to understand the people of other faiths, we, as Christians must not only be informed by our own Christian understanding (based on Christian criteria for our understanding) of other faiths but also by the self-understanding of the people of other religious traditions. What are the questions that other religions raise for Christians (especially Christian theologians)?

Since our task is to give a theological understanding of other faiths from a Christian perspective, it is therefore important that we make an honest effort to understand other faiths objectively, as they really are, and then, in the light of that, formulate a Christian perspective on them. One way to achieve this, is to give interfaith dialogue the place it deserves. In promoting dialogue, there should be no dichotomy between theological reflection through verbal communication and practical engagement with people of other faiths in real-life situations. The relationship between theologies of religion and of mission can be more easily comprehended where there is room for dialogue.

We are speaking about a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions. This does not mean that we are trying to create an exclusively Lutheran theology of religions. If that were the case, the presence and involvement of non-Lutherans both at the consultation and at the different stages of our study project would not have made much sense, if any at all. For the LWF member churches, as they live and work in cooperation with other Christian churches, the Christian/Lutheran theology of religions we seek to develop must as much as possible address theological questions that their encounter with people of other faiths raises for them as Christians—in this case, Christians who happen to be Lutherans also. For that reason, we have taken up topics—in our discussions, and in the working groups—that in many ways are also central to the Lutheran tradition.

Why do we need a Christian theology of religions? How do we justify our quest? There can be several responses. For instance, that we need a theology of religions in order to promote the art of giving, the art of defending, and also the art of receiving. But above all, the theology of religions we

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are looking for arises out of our need to take other faiths seriously. We sometimes have misconceptions about what they are and about their self-understanding. We *must take other faiths seriously*; and that is the reason for our quest for a Christian theology of religions. We must take them seriously:

- because they are there, and will continue to be there. To ignore them or continue to wage "missionary war" against them cannot be the answer to our quest for a Christian theology of other faiths;
- because that is the right approach, especially if we want to engage them in authentic dialogue (in all its forms and at all levels);
- because it is the right course of action if we want to contribute to the common good of humanity through a common focus on the human needs in our communities;
- because true reconciliation is only possible where each takes the other *seriously*;
- because a dialogue arising out of genuine mutual respect and understanding helps us to formulate a theology of mission. It helps us to find approaches on how to relate to people of other faiths in a more honest manner that is no stumbling block for future relations as so often in the past.

On the need for seriousness a member of the working group on Islam wrote:

Despite the fact that there are places within traditional theology to deal with the religions, the reality is that this has not happened, and all the branches of theology have shared in the failure . . .

We have not been serious with the religions theologically, nor have we dealt with religions seriously as people . . . The people of other faiths are present with us in a common world, they share our mutual problems, and they are talking about "religious" things similar to our own conversations. But have we authentically taken the measure of living persons of other faiths, their insights and their problems, their hopes and their fears? Certainly not to the extent that they are desirable . . . We are not likely to make an adequate response unless we treat the religions under a distinct theological head, as theology of religions suggests.¹

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH REALITY

Exaggerated church growth figures have, in the past, misled some into thinking that Christianity would simply make other religions disappear from the face of the earth so that it could some day become the dominant, conquering faith. Describing the resilience of other faiths against attempts by Christianity to annihilate them, Wilfred Smith uses an Old Testament incident: "We have marched around alien Jerichos the requisite number of times. We have sounded the trumpets. The walls have not collapsed."²

That other religions are here to stay and will probably increase in strength as the years go by is why a serious consideration of other faiths when developing a Christian theology of religions could also serve a good purpose: namely, in defining and evaluating a theology of mission in

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the light of the theology of religions we seek to develop. What is the relationship between a theology of religions and one of mission—or is there one?

Because of the close association of any given religion with its cultural setting, any theology of religions should also take into account the society/community aspect. “Theologically speaking, experiencing God and experiencing the world belong together and exist in reciprocal relation,” says Theo Sundermeier in *The Meaning of Tribal Religions for the History of Religion*, and “Tell me what your God is like and I’ll tell you what your society looks like.”

When we construct theological perspectives on other faiths by drawing from both our own Christian resources and from those resources that truly represent a self-understanding of the other faith in question, we, in a sense, honestly acknowledge that we are not the only ones to be theologically competent in matters of morality, spirituality or theological truth. Wilfred Smith presents the case more appealingly in these words:

. . . We are about to enter a new situation with regard to the other religious traditions of mankind. The time will soon be with us when a theologian who attempts to work out his position unaware that he does so as a member of a world and society in which other theologians equally intelligent, equally devout, equally moral, are Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims [and, one could still go on—Jews, adherents of African Religion and of other primal religions, etc.], and unaware that his readers are likely perhaps to be Buddhists or to have Muslim husbands or Hindu colleagues—such a theologian is out of date as is one who attempts to construct

an intellectual position unaware that Aristotle has thought about the world or that existentialists have raised new orientations, or unaware that the earth is a minor planet in a galaxy that is vast only by terrestrial standards.³

NOTES

- ¹ Roland Miller, "Prolegomena for Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths," paper presented at the meeting of the working group on Islam, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, 27–31 July 1995.
- ² Wilfred Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Glasgow: Fount Paperback, 1980), p. 90.
- ³ Ibid., p. 92.



SUMMARY REPORT FROM THE WORKING GROUP ON AFRICAN RELIGION

PREAMBLE

African Religion (AR) is an indigenous system of beliefs and practices integrated into the culture and world views of the African peoples. Although diverse in its local manifestations, it has common basic elements which testify to its unity regionally and at continental level. Among the main beliefs of AR is the acknowledgment and affirmation of one God who is the creator and sustainer of life and of all things. AR also recognizes the reality of the invisible world in which human life continues after death. The basis of AR lies in the strong belief in the unity of the cosmos, where religion embraces the natural and supernatural, the sacred and the secular. Religion permeates all aspects of life making the whole person a religious being in a religious world. The presence or absence of rain, the well-being of the community, giving birth to and naming a child, the cutting or planting of a tree: all come under the scope of religion. Prayer is central to AR.

The community is the core in which religion is expressed. The integrity of the community is sustained by a common understanding of moral and ethical values. Among others, these include the understanding of life as a gift to the

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community, which means that each member of the community is responsible for every other and obligated to provide for the welfare of the other. It is this sense of community that enables adherents of AR to care for the needy and vulnerable, such as widows, orphans, children and the old. Accountability for one's behavior, both in private and in public, is regulated by the community values.

African Religion is historically the original religious system of Africa. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and later Hinduism and others, have now also found a home in Africa. Statistically, it would seem that the adherents to AR have decreased due to conversions to these new religions of Africa, but in reality this is only at face value. People continue to be influenced by and to treasure AR in their total life, whether they acknowledge it or not. It is pluralistic in nature and quite hospitable to other forms of belief systems. That calls for a deeper understanding of AR and its encounter with other religions, a process which has already started. This study concentrates on exploring the encounter between AR and Christianity.

THE STUDY OF AFRICAN RELIGION SO FAR

Many of the general books on AR give surveys or indications of how it has been treated and presented. We can look at its study in two phases.

Starting in the nineteenth century, foreign missionaries, colonial administrators and overseas anthropologists gave their home countries the first inkling of AR which, as we know, they painted in the most gruesome terms, often with very wrong interpretations. Part of the problem on their part was pure arrogance, racial prejudice, misunderstanding,

narrow concept of anthropology, unwillingness to be challenged and enriched by other peoples and cultures. The Western world which was the main consumer of these books, articles, verbal reports, drawings and exhibitions of stolen or otherwise acquired works of African art, accepted them naively and without raising questions about their reliability.

These popular views of the Western world about AR have not changed much, even though fewer books and articles follow the old line today. You need only to give a lecture outside of university classrooms in Europe or America and Canada to hear people remark: "But missionaries told us that Africans worshiped spirits and are very frightened of them!" "But we sent missionaries to bring God to the Dark Continent where people had no religion!" There is no need to spend our energies exposing the ignorance about AR which was transmitted in various ways to the rest of the world. It is regrettable that this early phase wrought a lot of damage in different ways, among which are that:

- (a) It blocked the possibilities of cultivating a dialogue between AR and Christianity at an early stage of their encounter.
- (b) It neglected the values of African religiosity which had sustained society for millennia of human history.
- (c) This early phase put an unfortunate and false stigma on AR in the minds of Christians in Africa itself and abroad. Many Christians, especially the older converts and those brought up in "extreme" evangelical circles, still react negatively with regard to AR. Even today some missionaries and African Christians do their utmost to condemn it and to demonstrate how,

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according to them, AR is of the devil and has to be wiped out. Consequently, they create and propagate enmity among people, through dividing them according to their religion, into "good" (if they are Christians) and "evil" or "bad" (if they follow AR), something which is extremely unethical and unbiblical. Unfortunately, many individuals, families and communities have been driven to that state of mental attitudes and social behavior.

- (d) It suppressed and even silenced open discussion and objective evaluation of AR, especially among Christians. For that reason many of them are forced to behave hypocritically by leading one form of (Christian) life openly while practicing some aspects of AR in secret or during major crises in life. This is not healthy and leads to serious pastoral problems, especially in connection with sorcery, spirits, health, sickness, healing, marriage, death and social relationships.

In spite of these critical remarks which are often made and rightly so, we recognize and appreciate the value of recording and preserving African life in various forms, whatever the intentions of the missionaries and colonial rulers may have been. There were degrees of accuracy and error in transmitting and interpreting the materials they gathered. Even in that early phase there were some foreigners who saw value in AR and culture and treated them with a degree of respect. One of the greatest achievements of missionary presence in Africa was the translation of the Bible in part or in full into African languages, a task that is still going on. It was at first carried out by Protestant missionaries and African converts, but in recent years Roman Catholics have joined forces (albeit at a low gear). Bible translation brought

AR into a living proximity with Christianity and paved the way for dialogue (even if it was not called so). The Bible in African languages has set alight an ever-burning fire of religiosity, fueled with firewood from both traditions. This fire is shaping African Christianity.

The second and current phase of the study of AR is one characterized by an ever-increasing number of African scholars who research and write on AR, either in general or specifically about their own people. This started slowly but picked up momentum, especially with the establishment of departments of Religious Studies in African universities during the 1960s and 1970s. It was not an easy task at first, since a wall of resistance seems to have been erected in some academic circles.

The second phase of the study of AR has reached the point where we see new possibilities. We mention some of them:

- (a) Probably the most significant impact has been to treat AR in its own right. It has won a place in the field of world religions and can be subjected to scholarly investigation like other living religions. Scholars have accumulated sufficient information on it for it to be recognized as a significant religious phenomenon in African life. It has not been wiped out by either Christianity, Islam or Western ways of life, even though all these have had their impact upon it.
- (b) AR is a reality on the African scene and it has exercised a tremendous impact on the cultures and the mentality of African peoples throughout their history. It is deeply rooted in the psyche of the continent (including Madagascar). Anyone doing business in Africa—whether political, economic, educational, medical,

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religious or cultural—has to take it into serious consideration. Africa (or the world, for that matter) cannot afford to ignore or belittle it anymore, as was done formerly.

- (c) While appreciating AR as standing on its own, we recognize also that it has its own weaknesses, its shortcomings, its unanswered questions, and areas where it has not or cannot provide answers. Both paradise and hell exist in AR and in the life of the people, though these departments have yet to be clearly articulated.
- (d) The way has now been opened for dialogue between AR and Christianity. Indeed, the encounter between the two has been dialogical all along, even if this process has not been recognized as such by the churches. Any encounter between religions is a meeting of people, and when they meet they engage in dialogue of one form or another. A number of academic works have been produced, dealing with what, in fact, had been going on unrecognized and in spite of attacks leveled against AR (in the early phase of its study). We take up this point for further elaboration, since it is essential background for our study group.

RECOGNITION, DISCUSSION AND MENTION OF THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN AFRICAN RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY

No careful or substantial survey has been made of published materials on the encounter between these two religions. Likewise, no clear theological analysis has been made on this encounter. Furthermore, it is Christians (or Christian

scholars) who have been speaking, giving our interpretation or understanding of this encounter. This means that, in effect it is a monologue on a dialogical phenomenon. We have yet to hear how followers of AR see, experience and interpret this encounter, and the issues which they consider more important than others.

OBJECTIVES

- (1) The working group on African Religion was set up together with the other working groups on other religious traditions for the Lutheran World Federation's study project called "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths." The objectives of the study and the perspective from which the African group pursued its investigations are stipulated in the original draft of the study project. These are:
- (2) The study of a given tradition should pay adequate attention to both the canonical and the popular dimension.
- (3) It should explore concrete Christian encounters with that tradition.
- (4) It should reflect upon specific theological engagements with that tradition with a view to identifying common religious affirmations between that tradition and Christian theology, specifically Lutheran.
- (5) It should articulate a proposal for the future dialogue with that tradition, including its possible contribution

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to the development of a Christian/Lutheran theology of religions.

Bearing in mind these general guidelines, the Africa group has sought:

- a. To highlight the importance of African religious phenomena which must be studied for their own sake.
- b. To raise the awareness of Christians about the reality of African Religion which continues to be embraced even by those Africans who have converted to the Christian faith.
- c. To examine the relevance of the AR for Christianity in Africa.

This report of the Africa working group suggests aspects of a general direction of the study project. It is only a beginning and expects to be continued in the future. In addition to this document, there are papers which were presented at meetings of the Africa group in July 1993 and in August 1995. These papers and discussions have convinced the study group that African Religion has a contribution to make to the work and life of the whole church in Africa.

SOME AREAS OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN AFRICAN RELIGION

THE NATURE OF AFRICAN RELIGION

African Religion (AR) is a terminology created to cover the many manifestations of religion in ethnic or indigenous cultures of Africa as indicated in the Preamble of this paper. Like in other primal religions, one is born into it as a way

of life with its cultural manifestations and religious implications. AR is an integral part of the African ethos and culture.

AR manifested itself in various forms in ancient Egypt as it does today in an agricultural festival or other celebrations in Togo. The classical models of this religion would be the Hebrew religion, as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, Confucianism or Hinduism, except that these have extant written sources.

Although described as ethnically based, there is sufficient commonality to warrant the nomenclature "African Religion." The ontology, for example, is very much of one basic system centered on God, the source of all reality. Human beings are the priests of creation. Here, reality is described in communitarian terms with God as the source of its life and cohesion.

A further perspective on reality in AR is that it is composed of a dimension that is mundane and another that is supra-mundane. These two are in constant communication and intimately intertwined and closely related. God the Supreme Being is the source of life and exercises unquestioned sovereignty over it.

Other marks of religion such as holy places, cultic functionaries, communication with the spirit world, ethics that regulate personal and communal life are to be found in AR which is life-affirming. It projects all of creation as working together to sustain life.

THE SOURCES OF AFRICAN RELIGION

The sources of AR remained oral and experiential for millennia and generations until scholars, especially African,

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began to collect and to document the phenomenon. Today we have, for example, collections of prayers of AR (Mbiti) and the corpus of the poetry of the Ifa Divination System of Nigeria (Wande Abimbola). Several books, research theses and notes are also available to those who read; and other sources are available in daily life within ethnic cultures.

Names of God, names of divinities and names of human beings are all carriers of religious beliefs. Likewise, greetings, blessings, prayers (incantations and invocations), songs, oracular poetry, myths and proverbs, also express religion and from them we derive an understanding of AR. Other sources include practices associated with human and natural life cycles, legends and myths.

THE ROLE OF FAITH IN AFRICAN RELIGION

The Africans, like all people, often express fear which is generated by the unknown and the human inability to predict and control the future. Living close to nature, they are acutely aware of the multiple dangers inherent in human interaction with nature, other individuals and the spiritual world. Whatever threatens human survival and denies fullness of life generates fear.

In the light of such fear, however, AR affirms a belief in God, the benevolent Creator and sustainer of all life. Through this faith people entrust their lives and future to a supernatural being who is able to protect and save life. African cosmology is deeply religious, presupposing that Africans live by faith. Believing in the existence and reality of the spirit world

and spiritual being, AR holds that what happens in the spirit world affects the mundane world and vice versa.

Faith in the AR is both personal and communal; it is the basis of African hope. Expectation of the "good" from the spirit world encourages offerings, sacrifices and other religious rituals. It also encourages a communal spirit and a striving towards the common good. It is faith in the inherent goodness of humanity which makes Africans expect that when the right hand washes the left, the left hand will also wash the right.

SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN RELIGION

Spirituality in AR is described as "values by which a person individually or in community relates to the spiritual realm" (Mbiti). It is born out of a relationship between human beings and other realities which include God, spirits of the departed, divinities, spirits associated with natural objects and phenomena, and nature itself. Africans are extremely aware of the "triangle of reality" as a community in which they participate and to which they belong. Their spirituality is governed by the sensitivity to this reality of relationships and communication.

The relationship between the mundane and the supra-mundane is maintained through religious activities and practices like sacrifices, festivals and prayers. Of these, prayers are the most intensive expression of African spirituality. They are spiritual messages for the attention of the spirit world.

A study of prayers reveals elements of spirituality such as holiness, purity and cleanliness of heart. Prayers portray humility, faith, trust and confidence that humans have in their

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relationship with the spirit world. Prominent among the themes of prayers in AR are peace, love, tenderness, care and gentleness in the relationships of the human community. Praise, thanksgiving, joy at blessings received are also present in the prayers. From these, we can gather what Africans require of religion. The ultimate concern for fullness and blessedness of life is the central theme of prayers and that for which people struggle. AR wrestles with the reality of evil, suffering and pain.

Prayers may or may not be accompanied by offerings. Sacrifices are also another avenue of communication with the spirit world in the search for life and the defeat of death. They may be accompanied by vows that involve ascetic life or other modifications of life-style.

Spirituality in AR often means the quest for freedom from negative influences, protection from evil forces or liberation from life-denying circumstances. Here, spirituality often takes the form of rituals of reconciliation as well as of those of separation. All these affirm that living as an African is living in and with the spirit world. Spirituality motivates and undergirds people to build community, to respect the individual and to develop sustainable relations with nature. It is a spirituality for fullness of life lived in the knowledge that God and the world of spirits participate in our human dimension. Unity of life is hereby affirmed.

FULLNESS OF LIFE AND CELEBRATION OF LIFE

The spirituality of AR is geared towards fullness of life that is good and meaningful. Its prayers indicate that the good life is one marked by the power to procreate, by good eyesight, good hearing, good health, wealth and prosperity

to ensure personal value and dignity. The good life is lived in the context of harmonious relations in community, and with nature and the world of spirits. Hope is related to the realization of this fullness of life, especially in the form of longevity. Longevity is crowned by peaceful death, followed by proper burial rites to ensure that one is gathered with one's ancestors in the spirit world and that one does not become a "bad ghost" haunting persons and nature.

The good life is marked by ethical propriety. Africans maintain that traditional morality sanctioned by AR ensured the integrity of the community, of the individual and that of nature. Nevertheless, there are some taboos, mores and practices that tend towards the subjection of the individual to what is less than respectful and dignifying, if not downright inhuman. These religio-cultural demands call for further investigation and critical assessment or appropriation.

To ensure fullness of life, one has to remain integrated into one's community, for it is expected that the community provides security, caring and healing. To be separated from one's community is to be counted as dead. Here is one more evidence of AR's position that life is a unity and that fullness requires wholeness.

Africans love and celebrate life in all its many aspects, including personal, communal, economic and ecological. All stages of human life are celebrated but most especially those that signify the abundance or fullness of life. Birth, the attainment of sexual maturity, and the return to the spirit world (death) are all cause for celebration. Celebrative events and festivals honor individuals, build community and revive the contact with the natural world and the world of the departed. Very often celebrations bring all together

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in a communal meal as the culmination. This communion with the spirit world is of cardinal significance in AR.

Since life does not always run smoothly and obstacles have to be overcome, celebrating life often means ultimately celebrating salvation. To celebrate deliverance, songs, prayers and dances—rituals of cleansing from evil, pollution and shame—are often performed. People and places bear names that signify and celebrate salvation from dire circumstances. (For example, *Obushegi* is a Yoruba name that celebrates the power of God to perform with excellence. The name means “God has done this.”)

Celebrating is a way of recognizing the dependence of the human on the spirit dimension and specifically on God. It also signifies the element of communion. Sharing a meal is a demonstration of kinship and common purpose. Oneness may be celebrated in other forms, such as blood pacts or the exchange of objects. A key tenet of AR is that division diminishes life, hence wherever a larger community is created, this calls for a celebration. This regular experience is provided by the elaborate celebration of marriages, and the reconciliation of estranged persons and communities, and even ceremonial welcoming back of those who have been on a journey.

To celebrate is to affirm the priority of life over death and to tame the power of death by confining it to the process by which one moves from life in this dimension to life in the other dimension, in which the spirit beings live. Just as one's arrival in this world was celebrated, one expects to be welcomed and celebrated in the other world, for a life well lived here.

AFRICAN ANTHROPOLOGY: LIFE IN COMMUNITY

AR holds that life is the greatest gift which God has bestowed on humans. Hence, Africans are brought up, taught and trained to seek after and attain a life which must be enjoyed to its fullest, peacefully and undisturbed. At the same time, it teaches that human life and the pursuits of life are not attainable in isolation and apart from one's community because by definition it is a social life, a communal life nurtured and sustained by a network of interdependences of individuals and community, individuals and the spiritual world, as well as the natural environment. Therefore, in all of life's pursuits, AR reminds individuals always to strive for the maintenance of a relationship with their extended families and clans, their ancestors, nature and God. Existing in this network of relationships, individuals cannot avoid experiencing and being influenced by the customs of their community, customs which shape and influence their own lives as much as they shape and influence the lives of their neighbors.

Beyond the communal life, however, AR teaches that spiritual powers exist which can shape and influence individual lives, for better or for worse. Therefore, it is important to seek ways and means to manipulate or control those external powers and agencies which are more powerful than humans, through practicing rituals and magical recipes and charms prescribed by religious authorities to those who feel threatened.

PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS IN PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Given the fact that life is one of communal interrelationships, AR acknowledges that problematic areas (sins) exist which

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arise when individual acts undermine the stability of people's social life together. These problematic areas might be of existential, spiritual or emotional nature. The existential problems are manifest in drought and devastating floods, hazards of life such as being bitten by poisonous snakes, struck by lightning, killed by a falling tree, or such as infertility and repeated infant deaths, general bad luck, economic insecurity, failure in business ventures. The emotional or spiritual problematic areas manifest themselves through bad spirits and malicious persons, witches and sorcerers, and hatred or ill will towards people. These problems may also arise when individuals undermine the social rank of the older members of the family, fail to support their parents—all of which could provoke the anger and curse of the departed and founders of extended families and clans. Therefore, young people are discouraged from taking actions which might offend their elders or which fail to take their interests into account.

Taken individually or jointly, these problematic areas are what constitutes "sin". Thus "sin" is any activity by which individuals attempt to destroy, to diminish and threaten the lives of the community members. Sin and evil are measured in terms of the life of individuals who suffer and are injured by the deeds of other individuals. Thus, manifestations of sin and evil are the refusal to love, to care for and enter into creative and life-giving relationships with other people. They are understood more in terms of a breach of loving fellowship between individuals than in terms of human transgression of some abstract divine law. Sin is an activity which threatens individuals and the stability of their communal life. African Religion helps its adherents to seek salvation and relief from sin and evil as defined above.

INSTRUMENTS OF SALVATION IN AFRICAN RELIGION

In order to provide salvation and relief from these social sins, AR has designed a variety of protective rituals, magical recipes and charms. These are aimed at immunizing potential victims against witchcraft, evil spirits, bad luck, infertility, thieves, and forestalling failure in life's ventures and at promoting recovery from illness and other misfortunes. So as to forestall impending destruction of individuals and their communities, purifications are used to cleanse those who are defiled. Also, religious rituals and sacrifices have been devised to make peace with the living dead (ancestors), so that they might continue to support and protect their descendants.

These rituals and religious sacrifices, individually and collectively, are believed to have proven themselves effective in saving and preserving the lives of individuals, their families and community. Indeed, the greatest attraction to the African Instituted Churches (AIC, also known as founded churches) lies in their ability to integrate African religious belief and the Christian faith. These are churches that have severed themselves from overseas mission churches and from one another. Appreciative of the fact that salvation is not complete if it fails to address their concrete, daily problems such as healing, driving away troublesome spirits and protecting individuals against evil forces through charms, the AICs openly invite members and others to bring their fears and anxieties about witchcraft, bad luck, illness, unemployment and other misfortunes to the Christian community so that they may be given relief. The mainline churches in Africa are challenged to come to terms with the reality of African cosmology to meet the spiritual and bodily needs of their adherents. It is estimated that, if "historical "churches fail

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to provide holistic salvation, they will lose members to the AICs and the charismatic churches. Churches must engage in serious dialogue with African Religion in order to better understand African religious life and needs.

THE HUMAN DESTINY

The problem of death and human destiny occupies a central position in many religious traditions. In the Christian faith the focus is often on the individual salvation apart from and in exclusion of one's community, because individuals' faith and response to God determine their destiny. However, it is to be recognized that theologically, the church or Christianity is community-based—on the Trinity and the church as the Body of Christ or the people of God.

This Western emphasis on individual salvation apart from the society contrasts sharply with AR, which is community-centered. Africans hold the view that individuals exist because they belong. Therefore, anxiety about individual destiny and afterlife is foreign to the African world view. In the African anthropology individuals are assured of their afterlife because at death they are taken up by and gathered to their departed living dead (ancestors). Thus individual salvation is not possible apart from community. It is significant that even urbanized African Christians put such a high premium on being transported back to their original homelands when they die, so that they may be buried with their forebears.

Because death reunites individuals with their departed relatives, death is not perceived as the final enemy who annihilates their life. Rather, death is seen as an inevitable and natural conclusion of life, especially for those who die

at a mature age; it is an ecstatic experience of fulfillment that reunites an individual with the spirits who have gone to their final home (to live forever). Because individual immortality is understood coming automatically, fear and punishments are dealt with on this side of the grave so that, at the time of death, individuals have made things right with their fellows, spirits and, ultimately, with God. Furthermore, some African peoples underline the indestructible nature of the human soul by holding that, when persons die, their spirit continues beyond death. This view rests on the premise that the human soul is a divine spark which, at death, returns to God who made it in the first place.

CONTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN RELIGION

African Religion holds that the world and nature are good gifts that God entrusted to human beings: they provide nourishment for life, security and home for our bodies. Since the well-being of human beings is intimately connected with the well-being of the natural environment, AR shows respect and reverence for the natural environment. This reverence and respect for nature with its wonders and mystery enabled AR to maintain certain taboos and beliefs which prevented or discouraged people from abusing nature, for example the forests and rivers. Because forests were sources of necessities of life such as food, drink, houses, wood, clothes and medicines, the cutting down of certain trees or use of certain leaves was prohibited.

However, because conversions to other religions, the lure of modernism and the quest for so-called civilization and development, Africans appear to be gradually losing the respect for the mystery and dignity of nature. In consequence,

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they have subjected nature to gross abuses through unlimited industrial expansion and uncontrolled development.

The abuse of nature, both in Africa and the world, has caused untold ecological crises of serious dimensions. They are manifest, for instance, in health problems due to pollution of air and water through chemicals, industrial waste, overpopulation, depletion of natural resources, mass-killings of certain animal species and desertification, to name only a few examples of the abuse of nature.

In the social sphere, Africans are more and more losing the human-centered and communal orientation which was central to the religious ethos and beliefs. In consequence, Africa is experiencing serious social crises, marked by injustice and oppression, exploitation, violation of human rights, ethnic divisions and conflicts—resulting in Africans killing their fellow Africans—,civil wars and political intolerance which are creating floods of refugees.

Against this background, the teachings of some Christian groups which largely focus on the future intervention of a kind of messianic figure to rescue humans from their misery, is not realistic enough. They may succeed only in creating a dependency syndrome among Africans. Instead of challenging Africans to stand on their own feet and to tackle the socio-economic problems confronting the continent, these religious groups encourage them to pray to God to do the job for them. At worst, the dependency syndrome has encouraged African governments and citizens to beg and expect the European and American donor countries to rescue Africa from its ills. By taking a dim view of human beings and their achievements, these teachings tend to promote despair, paralysis, defeatism, moral dullness, social indifference and social irresponsibility.

The discussion of sin and salvation made clear that while AR teaches that God is the creator and sustainer of life, nowhere does it suggest that human beings should abdicate from confronting social problems in the belief that God will solve them. It teaches that survival and salvation are brought about by human willingness to work for them. People have to take control over their lives and responsibility for themselves and for their neighbors by engaging in activities for the welfare of the community. People have devoted much energy and resources to devise appropriate ceremonies, rituals and religious activities aimed at coping with the ills of this earthly life.

AR has encouraged people to take life into their own hands because it believed in them and their abilities to right the wrongs in their communities by healing broken relations and restoring the disturbed balance between the spiritual world and interpersonal relations. This optimistic anthropology is one of the treasures which Africans could fruitfully appropriate to regain confidence in the human ability to confront and overcome social problems. This resource challenges us to develop a theology of responsibility; to become co-creators with God, in order to transform our social and natural environment for the better. It challenges us to assume responsibility and to take our actions seriously. It reminds us that human dignity and glory lie in the responsible and creative powers locked in our nature, powers which are capable of re-ordering and transforming our communities for the sake of a healthy, sustainable, human, and just society.

The emphasis which AR puts on human relationships and the social wrongs and evils which individuals commit against others should be offered as an African contribution to

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Christian churches. It reminds the churches that sin is not only an evil activity which is directed against God but also has to do with social evil between individuals in society. This African insight gives greater strength to the central biblical thrust which teaches that sin is both a vertical and horizontal reality. For sin to be truly understood, the stories of Gen. 3 and Gen. 4 should be read together because they are two sides of the same coin, a reality which the theological emphasis on the sinful human before God has often neglected, especially in Protestant Churches. By calling attention to social evils, the African insight underlines the fact that, in the final analysis, it is not the Almighty God who suffers evil directly at the hands of evil deeds of oppressors and exploiters. Rather, it is the individual who suffers at the hands of other sinful individuals. However, when individuals suffer through evil, God, who is the Creator of all humans, is also offended.

The focus on social relationships by AR has also the positive aspect of reminding the churches that what is the heart of religion, especially the Bible, is not human obedience to law but life-giving relationships between God and humans, and among humans themselves. The purpose of religion is to nurture these relationships or restore them when they are broken. An appropriation of this human-centered approach in AR will help redirect theological teaching away from overemphasis on the other-worldly concerns, to the network of human relationships. These must be supported and continually transformed in order to humanize society and to enable its members to live fulfilling lives. As theology begins to sensitize individuals about social sins, it will also challenge them to reflect morally on what they do in their relations to their human fellows.

Finally, by focusing attention on the formation of healthy relationships and the creation of life-giving structures, theology will make necessary linkages between right believing and teaching (orthodoxy), and the right doing (orthopraxis), between faith and ethics. In so doing it would challenge believers to match their "correct" verbal profession (dogma) with their actions. By using a simple test of asking believers to demonstrate the authenticity of their faith by promoting healthy human relationships in the society, the churches will at last be affirming a very deep religious insight which St James gave to the church, when he noted that: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17, 20). This is exactly what Jesus himself taught (e.g., in Matt. 22:36-40; Mk. 12:28-31) and the apostle John (1 Jn. 3:17-18; 4:7-8, 11-11, 19-21), that whoever claims to love God must also love one's fellow humans, simply because faith and good works belong together.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many areas of concern in the Christian-African religion encounter that require further discussion at different levels of church life. While there may be an overlapping in some cases, the issues can be grouped as follows:

- a. **God:** Church, creation, fulfillment, grace, hope, kingdom of God, life, love, nature, peace, revelation, Trinity, worship.
- b. **Personal concerns:** belief, blessing, conversion, death and the hereafter, dedication, faith, healing, health,

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hope, joy, peace, personal value, dignity, prayer, salvation, sickness, sin, spirituality, wholeness, worship.

- c. **Practical religion:** Catechism, teaching, religious education, ceremonies, charms, dealing with crises, disputes, economics, ethics, evangelism, evil, festivals, forgiveness, mission, morals, mystical power, oppression, politics, public ethics and morals, reconciliation (with God-self-society-time), initiation rites, rituals, service, sin, evil (sinner), crime, spirits, symbols, taboos, threats to life and property, witchcraft.
- d. **Society:** Anthropology, calamity, children, church, community, conflicts, culture, disease, epidemics, environment, family, hunger, human rights, justice, land, liberation, mission, oppression, people of other ethnic groups and nations, poverty, refugees, sexual ethics slavery, the underprivileged (poor, retarded, outcasts), war, women.
- e. **Tools:** Bible, dance, drama, literature, modern technology, music, oral tradition, sacred places, symbols.
- f. **Miscellaneous areas:** Accusations, advantages, dangers, drawbacks, loss, emergencies, enrichment, fears, hostility, ignorance, judgement, prejudices, shortcomings.

This long list is intended to indicate areas in which theological questions have to be raised and looked at from the side of both Christianity and AR. Do these two religions speak the same language? Out of the long list, what are the basic and most essential elements which constitute each religious tradition? When these meet, what is the result: Is it collision or collaboration, both in theoretical terms and in practice? Where do we draw the line of collision or collaboration and

on what theological grounds? To what extent do the two religions enrich and illuminate each other theologically? As African theologians we are brought up academically in the Christian tradition; how far does this factor color and unconsciously influence our interpretation of AR?

In the light of the discussions in our study group some guiding principles for practical Christian life in Africa and for further study can be formulated. Such practical areas could be in worship, liturgy, rituals, use of symbols, hermeneutics of the Bible, health matters (in the broad sense), handling family issues, evangelism, theological education, etc.

On the academic level there is the big theological question of Jesus Christ and AR. If our premise and impression is that AR and Christianity are not at enmity with each other, what are the theological consequences (of this fact, presupposition, judgement, starting point)? For a long time the two religious traditions will continue to coexist in Africa. In their encounter, collaboration may prove more productive while collision can only be destructive.

FURTHER STEPS

It is recommended:

- (1) That materials of the working group on AR, as well as those arising from the planned Theology of Religions Consultation (July 1996) be made available at relevant levels, including the local churches; for example by means of cassette tapes, videos, drums, proverbs.
- (2) That efforts be made to educate people in our churches so that they come to appreciate and accept the positive

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contribution AR can make in enriching our lives holistically. There are taboos and mores and practices that tend towards subjecting the individual to what is less than respectful and dignifying, if not downright inhuman. These religio-cultural demands call for further investigation and critical appropriation.

- (3) That courses on AR be adequately taught in our theological seminaries and Bible schools by competent and unbiased teachers.
- (4) That churches (at their theological institutions and at other study centers) make an effort to engage in the kind of research work that will help to unearth the hidden treasures in our cultural and religious heritage that can make the Christian faith even more meaningful in the African context.

Since one of the objectives of the study project is to help us in the church to understand the relationship between AR and Christianity in order to apply the gospel in a more meaningful way, we encourage the churches to make use of the result of our research. The churches are invited to engage in a dialogue on the level of church life.

* * *

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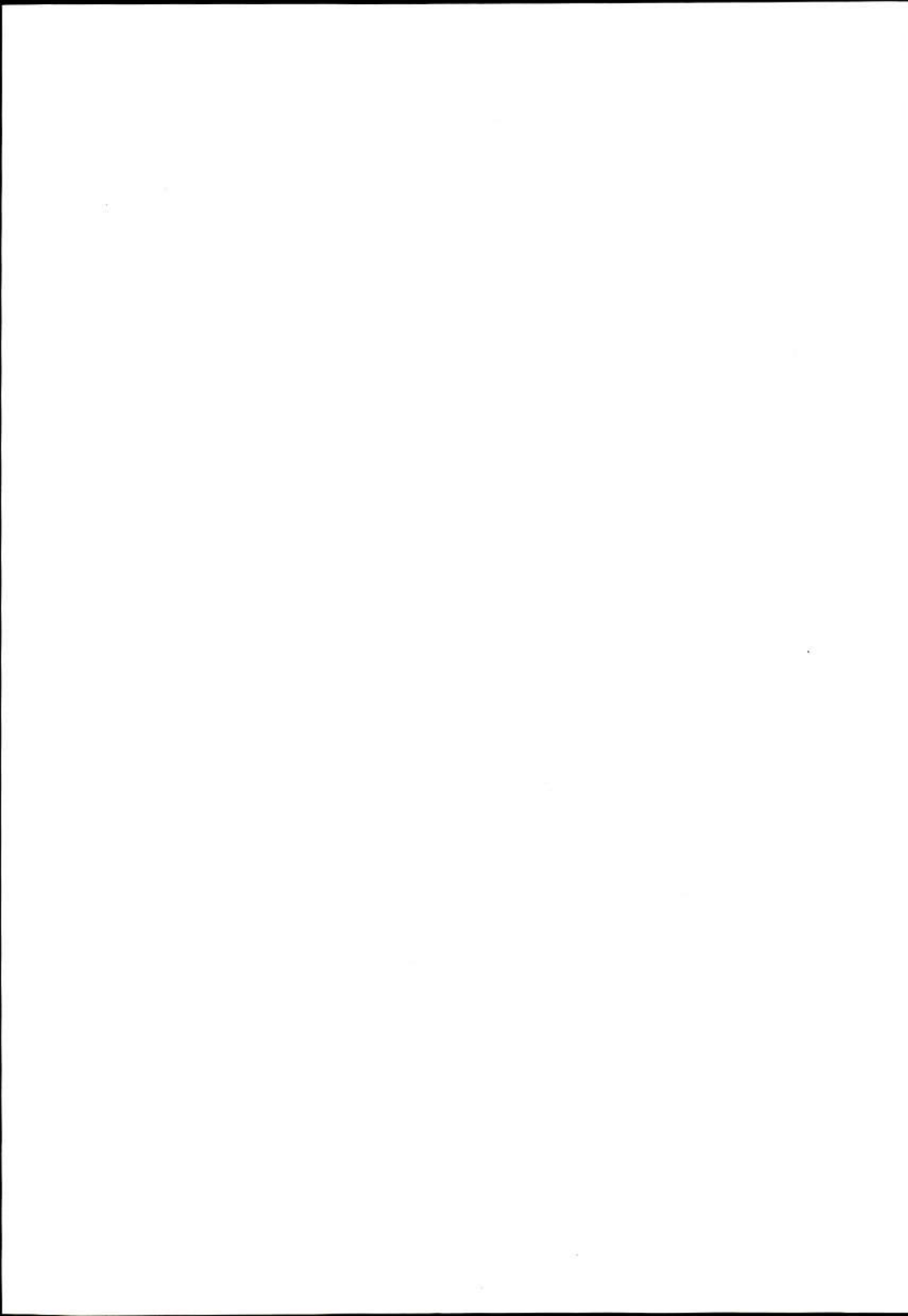
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SUMMARY REPORT FROM THE WORKING GROUP ON BUDDHISM

PREAMBLE

We consider it a privilege to meet in Asia, the birthplace of some of the major religions of the world. The ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of the Asian peoples, with their overwhelming religiosity and overwhelming poverty, is amazing. We discern how God has spoken to the peoples of this planet through the Asian sages, prophets, holy and wise persons, and continues to speak to the world in diverse ways.

The Christian presence is very small in numbers in this largest of continents. In many Asian cultures Christ is an alien, although he belongs to Asia as much as anywhere. It is our hope to explore ways and means to share our deep spiritual and religious convictions with our Buddhist sisters and brothers. We do this in dialogue—listening to and learning from each other. We encourage Christians, especially our Lutheran sisters and brothers, who live in the midst of Buddhist adherents, to establish bridges of friendship, to cooperate with them to build a just and humane world. As two religions that teach love and compassion, Buddhists and Christians in cooperation can spread the message of peace to a society torn apart by ethnic, religious, and tribal strife. We are aware of the Buddhist influence in the Western world today. Christians in the West rub shoulders with

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Buddhists in their day-to-day living. Many westerners adopt Buddhist meditation and monastic life. In this context we encourage our churches to enter into a genuine dialogue with Buddhists and to share the religious and spiritual resources of the two faiths "to mend the brokenness of creation, overcome the fragmentation of humanity, and heal the rift between humanity, nature, and God . . ."¹

PURPOSE AND GUIDELINES: WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO?

Meeting here in Thailand, where the vast majority (95%) of people are Buddhist, we have continued to explore central issues regarding Christian relations to Buddhists. Since many other Christians have long been engaging in relationships with Buddhists, it is important to keep our explorations here in the context of the larger LWF project, "Theological Perspectives on People of Other Faiths." In a world becoming increasingly pluralistic, the LWF has recognized the pressing need for a deeper understanding of the various other religious communities, and this project is intended to provide guidance and encouragement to member churches and congregations in understanding and relating to peoples of other faiths. The project is not in itself a *dialogue* with peoples of other faiths, but it has primarily involved self-reflection within the Lutheran-Christian community concerning theological resources in relation to people of other faiths.

It is important to recognize that the work of the study group does not begin *de novo*; many other Christians and Christian

groups have been engaging in various ways with Buddhists, on regional and local levels, in dialogue centers and academic institutions. In this work we draw strongly on experiences of other Christians in relationships with Buddhists. While we try to pay particular attention to Lutheran accents in theology, we see our work as an ecumenical contribution. The importance of this project lies in the fact that for the first time the Lutheran communities, represented by the LWF, have begun to engage in these explorations concerning the relationships of Christians with people of other faiths. Of course, some Lutheran individuals and organizations have in the past been involved in study and dialogue with Buddhists. But the reality is that most member churches have had little awareness of or involvements with the Buddhists who live in their communities. There is a general lack of knowledge about Buddhist practices and teachings, few materials suited for educating and guiding the churches with respect to Buddhists, and considerable disinterest on the part of many.

Yet the increasing globalization of all our societies, the growing pressure of the plurality of cultures and religions in close contact, and the many common problems that face us as humans together in our communities make it imperative that we Christians, both in Asia and in the Western societies, reach a deeper understanding of Buddhists. We have engaged in extensive conversations with Buddhists as we have explored Christian perspectives. The purpose is to serve the churches: to begin to offer some guidance and recommendations to the LWF member churches, encouraging them to live as friends and neighbors with Buddhists.

Christians in many parts of the world are in close, everyday contact with Buddhists as well as with people of other

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religions. As Christians, we see that relationship within the overall purpose of God: God is already present with our Buddhist neighbors, and as God's people, called into Christ's church, we also are to be present with them. We are together on a common journey, sharing with them in the sufferings and joys of human life; how can we ignore them, turn our backs to their sufferings and needs, and even disrespect their culture? We believe it is the vocation of Christians to be in relationship with Buddhists, to dialogue with them in the fullest sense of the word.

We see such dialogue as central to the mission of Christians. Entering into dialogue with Buddhists does not imply any watering down of the Christian witness, any compromising of Christian convictions. Rather, true dialogue, as has often been pointed out, involves entering in real human relationship with real people. To be present with them in this kind of relationship means standing with religious identity and conviction. It means a full, honest sharing of our convictions, complete with all our hopes and faith, weaknesses and doubts. It means witnessing to the hope that is in us, and hearing and respecting our partners as they share their convictions and faith with us. It is our assumption, then, that dialogue is not a substitute for mission, nor is it a strategy for mission; it belongs to the very nature of mission.

We further feel that, since our relationships with Buddhists have their place within God's overall purpose, theological thinking is best done in the context of this dialogue with Buddhists and with the other peoples of God's world. That is, as we reflect on the contents of our faith and interpret our tradition for this modern age, the "place" of this theology needs to be in the context where we live our lives—in this case, there, in our meetings with Buddhists.

We emphasize that relationships by their nature are between persons; so, while doctrine and precepts are important, that is not where Christian life and reflection begin. Dialogue is with persons. Yet persons are always rooted in traditions and institutions—the framework out of which people live their lives and find meaning. So meaningful relationships between Christians and Buddhists will also always involve interaction with the ideas and convictions, the structures and institutions, that make up the context of our lives.

AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT: WHAT WE ARE FINDING

Relationships between Buddhists and Christians throughout the world are varied and complex. There is no one type of Buddhist (the same goes, of course, for Christians). Much of Asia is predominantly Buddhist, with small minorities of Christians. Yet Theravada societies (e.g., Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia) are significantly different from Mahayana societies (e.g., China, Korea, Japan). For example, Theravada societies generally have a central role for the *sangha* (monastic order). Mahayana societies have a variety of traditions and practice devotion to heavenly Buddhas and bodhisattvas. There are many communities in which Tibetan tantric forms of Buddhism are practiced. In various parts of Asia there are Buddhist revival movements as well as new groups that have gained the allegiance of many Buddhists. And all of the varieties of Buddhist communities are also present in growing numbers within the Western world. Further, relations between Buddhists and Christians take on substantial differences depending on locality, types of

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people involved, purposes for such relationships, etc. Dialogues have been going on for centuries in some places, not at all in others. There are highly intellectual dialogues between scholars as well as interaction in daily life among ordinary people. There are relationships in which Christians aggressively seek to convert Buddhists, relationships in which Buddhists dominate numerically and culturally, relationships in which each group virtually ignores the other. Relationships between Christians and Buddhists necessarily are based in such local, communal considerations.

We are finding some new developments in Christian-Buddhist relations today. While dialogue with Buddhists took place in certain Asian contexts in the past, today that dialogue takes place all over the world. The population of Buddhists in the Western world has dramatically increased, both with immigration of ethnic Buddhist communities and with increasing numbers of Westerners adopting the Buddhist path. Moreover, Buddhists are developing more sense of identity and confidence over against Christians; as Christianity has been the religion of the modern age, some Buddhists feel Buddhism will provide spiritual direction in the post-modern era. There are many indications that one of the major future challenges to Christian self-understanding, and to Christian spiritual dominance even in the Western world, will come from Buddhists.

For these and many other reasons, we believe it is crucial for Christians both in Asia and in the West to learn ways of becoming friends and neighbors of the Buddhists living in their various communities, entering into dialogue of various sorts with them. Key to this is a change in attitude for many Christians—from an attitude of mistrust, fear, ignorance, and/or rejection toward anything and any persons associated

with Buddhism, to an attitude that sees Buddhists as God's children and therefore considers sharing in dialogue with them as part of the Christian calling.

DIALOGUE IN DAILY LIFE

One such place of dialogue is basic everyday living together. Christians in Asian localities, much smaller in numbers than Buddhists, share all facets of daily life with Buddhists—school, work, family life, suffering, death, etc. Yet we are finding that often these Christians feel constricted from sharing with their neighbors and even family in any meaningful way the real spiritual core of life. For example, attending the Buddhist funeral of a family member and engaging in acts of worship to that ancestor at the family altar is a strongly-felt obligation for Japanese. Christians often find themselves in a social and religious bind in this and many other such situations. The churches need to provide pastoral guidance to enable those members to discern how to relate meaningfully to their family and community, to give them courage and freedom in this dialogue of life.

Such dialogue in daily life takes many different forms in many different places. Buddhist families in the Western world, for example, have sometimes felt confused and restricted in this predominantly Christian context. Their spiritual needs as Buddhists are often ignored, or they are discriminated against, or they feel pressure to convert to Christianity. Such situations again call for pastoral guidance from the churches to help Christians enter into real personal relationships with Buddhists—dialogue in daily life that shares, respects, and promotes the wholeness of life for the Buddhists.

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DIALOGUE AS ENGAGEMENT IN COMMON CONCERNS

Another very important place for dialogue with Buddhists is common involvement and cooperation in the many social, economic, and ecological issues and problems all human societies face today. The issues and problems are vast and critical: environment, violence and warfare, refugees, discrimination, exploitation, modernization with its accompanying ills, etc. We have been finding that such a place for dialogue may well be the most promising doorway to opening up a relationship between peoples of different religions. Often it is difficult for Christians and Buddhists to talk about their deep beliefs because they have no relationship of trust and sharing. From our conversations with Buddhists we have been learning how fear of being pushed to convert, for example, keeps Buddhists from trusting Christian intentions. But cooperating on common, practical concerns that call for joint action is a neighboring activity which can begin to create a relationship of respect and trust. These pressing issues affect everyone's welfare and cannot be left only for political and social agencies to solve. Christians need to cooperate with Buddhists to bring the spiritual and moral forces they both have into play for real healing and transformation in society.

As an example of the need for such cooperation, consider the tragic situation of women entering prostitution and children given into prostitution by their families in poverty-stricken, rural communities in areas of Asia. Families in these communities are struggling for survival in the shift of the modern economy toward capitalism, tourism, etc., and prostitution is one of the only sources of support in this desperate situation. Buddhist families often associate their situation with a one-sided understanding of *karma* (the law

of action and effect), thinking one's situation in life is the result of karma from previous lifetimes, so it can only be accepted and paid off. The women who provide support for their families through prostitution think of their sacrifices as making merit for the sake of the family. But Christian families in some of these communities also resign themselves to their lot unquestioningly. Christian prostitutes sometimes defend what they do by saying, "If Christ could give up his life for me, then I should be willing to give up my life for my family." The tragic problem seems intractable and certainly cannot be solved only through social and economic programs. Christians and Buddhists need to talk and work together, recognizing that both groups have been involved in the failure to solve the problem. We all must engage in this issue with a high level of care and commitment, changing not only the underlying economic situations but especially also the attitudes that accept such a terrible situation for young women and for the community itself.

The issue of prostitution is but a specific example of the much broader situation of women in general. While poverty, exploitation of laborers, lack of education, powerlessness, disease, and many more problems affect all people, women often bear the brunt of such problems because of their traditional role and position in society. Christians and Buddhists have much to talk about in this area. Both religions have scriptural bases for the equality of women and men. The Buddha taught that women as well as men can attain enlightenment, and he established the orders both of *bhikkhus* (monks) and of *bhikkhunis* (nuns), as well as lay men and lay women. Jesus taught women as well as men, and Paul wrote that there is no distinction of male or female, for all are one in Christ. Yet both religious communities have

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an equally pervasive history of subordinating women in religious roles, reflecting and legitimizing the cultural traditions of male dominance and suppressing women in all these societies. Only recently have Christian groups begun to include women in ordained religious roles. Ordination of women as *bhikkhunis* lapsed in all the Theravada communities. It is continued today in Chinese Buddhism and the related traditions in Japan and elsewhere; the Buddhist order of nuns is particularly strong in Korea. Today, in Theravada societies, Buddhist women still give themselves totally as renunciants; yet because they are not ordained as *bhikkhunis*, they have low status and little support. In Thailand, for example, some women serve as Mae Jis, taking the Eight Precepts and serving society in many ways, though they are only given the status of lay disciples. Sometimes in their poverty they are forced to beg, treated with contempt by society—while the ordained monks doing the discipline of receiving food in their bowls are treated with high respect. As we converse with Buddhists on this issue, it behooves Christians, first of all, to recognize that treatment of women in Christian tradition has been no less oppressive than treatment of women in Buddhist tradition. And then, it is high time for Christians and Buddhists together to work on this problem at all different levels, sharing and working to fulfill the vision of each tradition of a community in which women and men are equal in spiritual worth and, consequently, equal in value in family, labor force, education, and all the other areas of our life in human communities.

In these situations of working together on common concerns and issues, it is important that the dialogue be completely open and honest, without ulterior motive, without condescension. In a relationship of trust and honesty,

Christians and Buddhists can share not only their spiritual and moral strengths but also their weaknesses and failures. Social problems in our common society result from failures on all sides, and a self-critical attitude as well as mutual constructive criticism are necessary parts of the dialogue.

DIALOGUE IN SPIRITUALITY

A promising practical area for sharing and conversation is spirituality and religious discipline. Experience is showing that Christians can share and learn from and with Buddhists in this realm of spirituality, learning also in the process more respect and appreciation for the Buddhist tradition and those who practice it. In Japan, for example, for a long time there have been Japanese Christians who have practiced meditation under Buddhist masters. And in recent years there have been numerous exchanges and retreats in which monks and nuns and others from both Buddhism and Christianity have shared their spiritual practices. Some on the Buddhist side have taken over Christian practices of Sunday sermons and study. Of course, ill will and mistrust can be created when outsiders presumptuously coopt one's deep spiritual practices without understanding and respect, a complaint sometimes expressed by Native Americans and other indigenous peoples. But experience shows that Christian-Buddhist sharing in spirituality generally fosters a higher level of respect and trust between the groups.

DIALOGUE IN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

These practical areas of dialogue cannot, of course, be divorced from the deeper convictions and resources that each brings to the common concern. Thus these kinds of

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dialogue—whether dialogue in daily life or dialogue in common projects or dialogue in spirituality—lead more specifically to theological reflection and conversation. If an atmosphere of trust and respect has been created, dialogue can also take place in the deeper, core area of faith and theological convictions.

Christians engaging in such theological dialogue will be aware that the Buddhist vision of the ultimate truth, the nature of the world, human nature, etc., is very different from the Christian view. These deep differences need to be recognized clearly and even appreciated as hallmarks of these two religions. But experience has shown that such sharing, in a relationship of trust, can lead to deeper understanding on both sides. There are many benefits in such dialogue. Ignorance and false views about Buddhists are overcome; Christians can begin to look at Buddhists in a new, more respectful light. In such dialogue, Christians begin to learn the language of Buddhists, as it were, as Buddhists learn Christian language—an essential step if meaningful communication is to take place.

The authentic Christian motivation to share the gospel—in Christ called to witness—has a close relationship to such dialogue. To communicate the gospel meaningfully in the Buddhist world, Christians need to learn from Buddhists what language is meaningful and what language is misleading and even threatening to Buddhists. The Buddhist context becomes the arena and sets the agenda for Christians to rethink and reformulate the Christian story and its meaning. It is essential, at the same time, that Christians recognize the authentic Buddhist motivation of spreading the Dharma; being in relationship with Buddhists means listening as well

as speaking. And in listening we may not only better understand Buddhists but learn something of God's ways as well.

As an example of learning meaningful language from Buddhists, some Christians have considered the Buddhist analysis of existence. All living beings have three basic characteristics: all life is transitory (*anicca*), and it is characterized also by pain or suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self or nonsubstantiality (*anatta*). Buddhists refer to these as the three signs of being. In our relations and dialogue with our Buddhist neighbors, these perceptions about existence can help to shape our thought and language, as did other concepts and languages in the early church. "With what boldness did persons like John and Paul press into the service of the gospel the terminology of Greek philosophy, the symbols of the mystery religions, and the structures of thought of the Gnostics" (East Asia Christian Conference, Bangkok Assembly, 1964). The Buddhist understanding of the three signs of being may perhaps provide some context for expressing how our Lord's strength is made known in weakness. For example, the late Lynn de Silva of Sri Lanka suggested that the self-emptying act (*kenosis*) of Christ can be deeply meaningful to those who emphasize *anatta*, non-self. Our desire to assert our ego needs to be examined in the light of our Lord's action who himself was the fullness of God but hung on the cross as *anatta*. The cross is Christ's embodiment of the depth of suffering, *dukkha*. Christ the eternal entered time and became the one characterized by *anicca*, impermanence. The Christological hymn of Philip-
pians 2 can thus be a meaningful sharing of the message and ministry of Christ with Buddhists, as Christians struggle to communicate in new terms and concepts, realizing that this

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involves self-emptying and giving up some of our familiar, comfortable ways of thinking and communicating.

Being in conversation with Buddhists not only opens up better understanding and communication with them, it also helps Christians to do some reflecting on their own theology and practice. While Buddhist ideas may seem very distant from Christian beliefs, we are learning from experience that Buddhists bring many challenges to Christian theology, which can lead to new insights for Christians. For example, the Buddhist tendency to relativize all language and concepts can challenge Christians to take another look at their own basic theological concepts, being reminded that these are after all human constructs designed to express that which is beyond human conceptual capacity—the reality of God and of God's ways. Traditional methods of dialogue with Buddhists based on doctrinal models have not led to much deepened understanding (or increased self-understanding) on either side. Have Christians been willing to try out new and different ways of thinking? Our conversations with Buddhists have suggested that Christians might well explore what kinds of insights can come if we really listen to Buddhists in trusting, sharing conversations and common work.

As many have suggested, religious themes can often be seen in polarities rather than as exclusive opposites. While the perspective in one religion may give priority to one pole, the other pole is also present though perhaps submerged in tradition. As we have explored Christian theological views in the light of Buddhist experience, we have found that some Buddhist themes and perspectives actually have a certain resonance in the Christian tradition—helping Christians to retrieve their own tradition and thus deepen their theological understanding. Thus when we Christians

dialogue with Buddhists, there also takes place an inner dialogue within us, as we recognize memories and insights long forgotten or neglected.

Buddhism, for example, is a religion that puts much stress on *seeing*—awakening from delusion, seeing reality directly. The Buddhist search for insight, enlightenment, understanding, and mental clarity is a result of seeing and a search for deepened vision. Christianity, on the other hand, strongly emphasizes *hearing*—God speaks and humankind responds with attentiveness and obedience. The prophet says, “Thus says the Lord,” and the faithful hear God’s word and obey. As we talk and share with Buddhists, however, we are led to recover a significant “seeing” element in Christian tradition, from the visions of the prophets to the insight of the wisdom teachers to the enlightening activity of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, Buddhists also recognize the place of hearing; a disciple is a “hearer,” and the classical sutras begin, “Thus I have heard.”

In a related polarity, Buddhists put heavy stress on wisdom or knowledge (*jnana*), while Christians give centrality to love (*agape*). Yet, as Fr. Aloysius Pieris suggests (in *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*), within the liberative knowledge of the Buddhist path there is a role for love (*karuna*) as the prelude for, and manifestation of, knowledge. In dialogue with Buddhists, Christians also begin to recover the many facets of the wisdom (*gnosis*) tradition that has been an authentic part of the Christian path but was submerged and forgotten in the wake of heresies and doctrinal battles of previous ages.

As another example, we might explore the basic understanding of the human predicament, which seems to be

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very differently understood by Buddhists and by Christians. According to the Christian tradition, humankind was created in the image of God (*imago dei*) but lost that status because of the fall. The human predicament is thus described in terms of sin, guilt, and estrangement from God, with death and decay regarded as consequences of the fall. Humanity thus shares the common heritage of a broken relationship that can only be restored through divine intervention bringing atonement and forgiveness. But Buddhists see the human predicament in terms of pain and suffering due to deluded passion (desire, greed, etc.). The original enlightened status of humankind (Buddha nature) can only be restored by knowledge and spiritual discipline, leading to detachment from passions, to peace of mind, and enlightenment.

While these perspectives seem very different one from the other, there are nonetheless ample opportunities for further exploration of these issues. For example, the Buddhist idea of Buddha nature (original enlightenment) may suggest some new ways of thinking about the Christian concept of *imago dei*. There is in Christian theology no consensus about the degree to which the image of God is lost or destroyed. Lutheran theology inherited the Augustinian pessimism emphasizing the total depravity of humanity. The challenge from the Buddhist perspective may encourage Christians to investigate to what degree this pessimistic view was the result of polemical situations (Augustine confronting Pelagian heresy, Luther confronting Catholic emphases). Further, we note that the Pure Land sect of Mahayana Buddhism strongly holds to salvation exclusively based on the vow of Amida Buddha for all humankind—that is, redemptive work offered from outside. Finding within Buddhism both liberation by one's own effort and salvation from outside,

Christians may be encouraged to explore more deeply the biblical images of the human predicament and its solution. The exclusive emphasis on sin and forgiveness narrows down the biblical scope. The Bible includes such themes as suffering, oppression, bondage, sickness, annihilation, persecution, loss, despair, loss of meaning, etc., suggesting in turn various aspects of salvation, such as healing, liberation, restored human dignity, new life, hope, understanding, and wisdom. In all of these investigations the very different Buddhist perspectives provide an ongoing challenge and stimulus for creative theological thought.

Again, challenges from Buddhists concerning the achievements of the Buddha as human might encourage Christians to explore more deeply the human nature of Christ, certainly emphasized in the Bible and confirmed at Chalcedon. The man Jesus embodied a true humanity and offered himself as the example for obedience and the way to walk and live. The essence of his humanity, expressed through incarnation, the life full of love and compassion, and crucifixion, would be characterized with the keyword *kenosis*, emptying oneself, or being for others. This is not only human nature but the very nature of the life-giving God. In this way, conversation with Buddhists encourages Christians to develop more fully a "Christology from below." At the same time, Christian theologians are finding Mahayana conceptions of the cosmic dimensions of Buddha to be suggestive for new insights into the cosmic Christological emphases in the Bible.

Buddhists also offer many challenges as Christians rethink the experience of being the church within a Buddhist context. Christians believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom and in whom the Lord gathers God's people to be the

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“community-creating community” in a world broken up by separate histories, languages, and cultures. It is interesting that a translation of the Bible into the Buddhist setting used the Pali term *upajjahaya* to connote the Holy Spirit. In initiating a person into the Sangha (the set-apart community of the disciples, that is, those who take up the discipline to practice the teachings, the Dharma), traditionally the candidate must have an *upajjahaya*, the monk who functions as the guide, counselor, advocate, and teacher. The work of the Holy Spirit as “Paraclete” (the one who accompanies alongside) may take on deeper meaning for Christians as they reflect on the role of the *upajjahaya* in relation to the community. Christians recall that the life of the Buddhist Sangha actually had a close parallel in the earliest Christian community whose discipline is indicated in Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–37. This communal discipline was reportedly not observed for long among Christians, but the Buddhist Sangha has continued to maintain such discipline as its requisite through all these centuries. There is no distinction between members who come from a diversity of backgrounds, socially both high and low. Greatness is not seen in terms of those who *have* so much, but of those who give up so much. Challenged by the reality of the Sangha, Christians need to see with renewed vision that the church which the Holy Spirit leads and guides is the community of Christ’s *disciples* entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. The world, standing amid the ruins of broken homes, hopes, ideals, and social structures, must see fellowship in which there is no brokenness.

It may be unsettling to explore new ways of thinking about traditional doctrines and new ways of being the church in the world. But we believe that there is nothing outside

God's rule, for all things cohere in God. We cannot claim in our traditional formulations to exhaust the implications of these affirmations and our understanding of the nature of Christ in whom God will sum up all things. We need the courage to follow where the Holy Spirit leads us, even beyond the truth boundaries we have presently set for ourselves. As an Asian Christian statement put it, we need to discern the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of people, seeking to bring them as persons and communities into Christ's obedience. "This purpose and power of God needs to be discerned as well within as outside the Church. . . . This is why Christians need to listen and relate to those outside the churches as they speak about life, its meaning and its possibilities, so that out of such listening may come a greater understanding of the faith itself. To confess Christ is to point to Him wherever He is at work and to follow Him in whatever He is doing." (*Confessing the Faith in Asia Today*, East Asia Christian Conference, Hong Kong, 1966).

THE NEED FOR ON-GOING EXPLORATION AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

We feel strongly that the churches need to continue in various ways the exploration into theological perspectives on Buddhism. Buddhists are the major population in many areas of Asia, and increasingly they are becoming an important presence in the Western world. Given the rapid globalization and the continued crises in our world situation, the need for dialogue with Buddhists and with peoples of the other religious communities will become even more

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crucial in the future. Most importantly, that is God's way: God entered into another world—our world—in the incarnation, and so our incarnational action in sharing in God's presence in all cultures and religions is imperative.

- (1) We recommend that this work on theological perspectives on Buddhism be continued at numerous levels. It is first of all the responsibility of the member churches at the local and regional levels to see to the on-going work of this project. There may be workshops, training sessions, local joint projects with Buddhists, occasions for sharing spirituality, and much more depending on the needs and resources in each local church.
- (2) We strongly recommend that, as much as possible, all planning discussions, programs, study groups, workshops, etc., include the full participation of some Buddhist people as well as Christian people who are well acquainted in Buddhism. We have found that the active presence of Buddhists throughout our study has greatly enhanced our understanding of Buddhist-Christian relations.
- (3) We encourage churches at the local and regional levels to address themselves to pastoral concerns in Christian-Buddhist relationships, such as funerals, ancestor worship, intermarriage, participation in Buddhist festivals, folk beliefs, etc. At the same time, we encourage pastoral concerns to be turned also to Buddhist people who struggle with the same sorts of tensions with respect to Christian practices.
- (4) We recommend that theological institutions place emphasis on understanding Buddhist history, tradition,

practice, and peoples. As much as possible, such study should include practical involvement with Buddhists and Buddhist culture.

- (5) We recommend that churches on the local and regional levels encourage and provide scholarships or assign pastors, scholars, and students to study Buddhism in Buddhist institutions and contexts, to learn relations with Buddhists from the inside and to provide guidance to Christians in this area. Strong support for this recommendation comes from the case of Mahidol University in Thailand sending a Buddhist woman to take her Th.D. from LSTC in Chicago. Five years of study at LSTC gave her a deep understanding of Christianity; her dissertation on *Kamma and Grace* provides a model of Buddhist-Christian theological dialogue; and her return to teach as a Buddhist at Mahidol University means she will be influencing Thai students and faculty into a sensitive understanding of Buddhism in relation to Christianity. Careful use of this model in selected programs for Christians studying in Buddhist institutions will be very beneficial for guiding Christians in this area.
- (6) We recommend that the churches assign people to enhance the study of Christian spirituality by sending them to study under Buddhist masters. The area of spirituality is a very important and promising one, and the church needs guidance from persons who have received training from Buddhist masters.
- (7) We recommend that the LWF, through its member churches, assign the project of constructing an annotated bibliography (or bibliographies) of materials helpful for Buddhist-Christian relations. This bibliography might

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be constructed on different levels and for different regions and languages.

- (8) We recommend that the churches assign several Lutheran theologians to study with Buddhist scholars and explore the dialogue with particular attention to characteristic Lutheran theological themes and resources. Since some Lutheran perspectives (e.g., the *simul* categories, theology of the cross, etc.) seem to have a certain resonance with some Buddhist perspectives, such work may be a contribution Lutherans could make to the ecumenical work in Buddhist-Christian understanding.
- (9) We recommend that, as much as possible, work carried on by the LWF and its member churches in the area of Buddhist-Christian relations be related to the broader Christian ecumenical context.
- (10) We recommend that the member churches at regional and local levels devote focused attention to exploring *how* to communicate the gospel meaningfully and lovingly in the Buddhist context in the various areas. This must develop first of all on the local level: Christians engaged in the daily sufferings and joys together with local Buddhists. It would entail new actions such as having a monk come to speak with the congregation, visiting the local temple, etc.
- (11) We recommend the publication of an occasional newsletter to keep the member churches informed of on-going activities, seminars, conferences, study opportunities, etc., pertaining to Buddhist-Christian relations.

- (12) We recommend that the LWF publish selected material from the papers written by the study groups and make these available as resources to the churches.

These explorations and suggestions have grown out of our study in these two meetings in Buddhist countries (Japan in 1993, Thailand in 1995). An essential part of our exploration has been the opportunity to converse in an open, trusting atmosphere with Buddhists throughout our meetings. Further, we have been greatly helped by the participation of Japanese and Thai Christians who have deep knowledge of Buddhism and live in daily contact with Buddhists. The papers and presentations that formed the basis of our study are as follows:

- Naozumi Eto, "Redemption and Christology"
Naozumi Eto, "Meeting of Christians with Buddhists: the Church's Experience in Japan"
Ted Ludwig, "Challenges to Christian Theology from Buddhists"
Ted Ludwig, "Rethinking Theological Paradigms in Relation to Buddhists"
Ted Ludwig, "Meetings of Christians with Buddhists in the West"
Eardley Mendis, "Toward a Lutheran Perspective on People of Other Faiths"
Eardley Mendis, "Buddhist-Christian Relations in Sri Lanka"
Eardley Mendis, "Buddhism and Christianity, Friends or Foe? Some Common Ground"
Parichart Suwanbubbha, "The Position of Women in Buddhism"
Kyaw Than, "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths"
Kyaw Than, "Our Understanding of Mission as a Factor for Unity or Division"

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Notto Thelle, "Issues and Challenges in Relation to Mahayana Buddhism"

Notto Thelle, "Christianity Encounters Buddhism in Japan: a Historical Perspective"

* * *

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NOTE

- ¹ Stanley Samartha, *One Christ—Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991):12.

SUMMARY REPORT FROM THE WORKING GROUP ON CONFUCIANISM

PREAMBLE

We, whose lives have been shaped by the East Asian cultures, are in a variety of ways inheritors¹ of the Confucian ethos and spirit. At the same time, as Christians, the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus governs the way we experience our world and live our lives. This double inheritance has made our engagement in the present study both intellectually challenging and existentially compelling.

Unlike relatively cohesive religious movements such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, which for the most part are readily identifiable, the Confucian ethos and spirit is elusive. The question, for instance, of who is a Confucian is in most cases almost impossible to answer. Except for a small, highly self-conscious and articulate group of spokespersons for the Confucian commitment it is not clear who is a Confucian. There is no rite of entry and no doctrinal badge of adherence. There is not even any clear ritual identity, since even persons who feel a Confucian identity may no longer perform the traditional rites. If it is to be called a religion at all, then it can only be described as a "diffused religion."²

We find it easiest to describe Confucianism as an ethos, way of life or world view that is historically associated, whether

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closely or loosely, with a particular body of texts.³ "Confucianism" is, in fact, a misnomer, despite the formative historical role of Confucius (BC 551–479). Traditionally this way of life was referred to as the way of the "*ju*" (literally "the weak," but referring to the guardians of cultural learning) or as adherence to the "*tao-t'ung*" ("inherited Way" or "Way of the Sages"). At its shallowest, the Confucian ethos is simply adherence to certain observable rites, such as ancestor veneration. At its deepest it is a commitment to ultimate values and ultimate truths at the heart of which is the unity of Heaven and humanity, which in some forms can give a divine⁴ dignity to the human as a moral and social being.

One way to summarize the Confucian vision is to take from the words of the classic Confucian text, the *Great Learning* (*Ta Hsueh*). This text envisions world peace as the natural outflow of an integrated moral environment. Thus, only when individuals are persons of moral cultivation can the home be established well; only when the homes and families are well established can the nation be well governed; only when the nations are well governed will there be peace and equality under all of heaven. The true Sage is the one who is able to turn vision into reality.

This comprehensive Confucian vision has had wide influence throughout all of East Asia. In the early centuries after Christ Confucian ideas began to permeate Korea and in later centuries, through Korea, Japan. They also spread throughout Vietnam. Today some 1.3–4 billion people live in societies that have been deeply influenced by Confucian values, including 1.2 billion Chinese, 126 million Japanese, 70 million Koreans and 74 million Vietnamese. Beyond this are the East Asian diaspora, including 15 million Chinese

in Southeast Asia and over 5 million East Asians and Vietnamese in the western world. They have profoundly shaped the personal and communal ethics of these societies as well as the political culture.

CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE OF THE CONFUCIAN-CHRISTIAN CONVERSATION

REASONS FOR CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE

We believe that the LWF has in a very timely way recognized the civilizational importance of the Confucian tradition in shaping the values, behaviors, meanings and lives of a major segment of the human community by including it as one of the principal traditions in the present study. Because of its diffuse character the living importance of the Confucian tradition has often been simply bypassed or downplayed.

There are, in fact, cogent reasons why one can no longer bypass the Confucian commitment when engaging the major life-shaping and value-forming traditions of the world. Amongst these reasons are the following:

- (1) The demise of Marxism, and the perceived or real decline of the West. These together have given rise to a fundamentally new situation. In the case of Marxism, the modern Chinese people were in search for an ideology which is "from the West and at the same time against the West." Marxism fits the bill. But today its credibility is under severe strain. At the same time the decline of the West is accompanied by an increasingly higher profile for indigenous world views. Both of these

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facts mean that the East Asian traditions, most notably Confucianism, have found a new space for development and recognition.

- (2) The existence of a renewed Confucian intellectual vigor that has its roots back in a "Manifesto" of 1958 and which reaches back even farther. Major figures of Confucian commitment both outside and within China are speaking of a Third Era of Confucianism. Even if overstated, it reflects an important change in mood.
- (3) The new economic leadership of East Asian societies that have a basis in Confucianism. This is reversing a centuries-long trend that coincided with the demise of Confucianism. At the same time, many of these societies are experiencing an internal disintegration of values. Confucianism clearly has a stake in these developments. Reflecting this new economic vigor and cultural self-consciousness is the rise of the self-understanding of many businessmen in East Asia as "Confucian businessmen" (*ju-shang*).
- (4) The persistence of a Confucian ethos in the life of the people. On the one hand the traditional rites nurture a communal ethic, individual integrity, and cultural identity; at the same time the practice of these rites for some fades off into popular religion. To a large degree these tendencies define the immediate context within which congregations exist.

ASSUMPTIONS

We have entered into this conversation with certain underlying assumptions which we all share. Included in these are:

- (1) The central importance of the human community in all our endeavors and the irreducible dignity of the human person. This must inform all that we do and say. This is a conviction that is strongly nurtured by our double inheritance.
- (2) The primacy of the divine initiative for understanding and realizing our human dignity. This is a conviction that we have first as Christians but which also finds strong support in our Confucian inheritance.
- (3) The brokenness of our humanity because of an alienation from God that has entered into the human situation, however explained, which affects all people, all that we do and say, and which human effort is not sufficient to reverse or repair. Both our inheritances recognize the human dilemma of the inability to attain perfection in some form, though our Christian heritage enables us to experience the full force and radical nature of this reality.
- (4) The given reality of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, who is Sage, Messiah and Lord. As Sage Jesus is the embodiment of benevolence and wisdom that unifies Heaven and Earth. As Lord, Messiah and Sage, his life, death and resurrection is the creative source of our reconciliation with God, who is love, and so also with one another and all of creation. This conviction is at the heart of our Christian heritage and, we believe, something to which our Confucian heritage is also open.
- (5) The gospel, which announces this lordship, and is meant for all without exception. In this conviction we dedicate ourselves anew to speak and act in a way that

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conforms with the cruciform way of Jesus, so that with all gentleness and willingness to risk one's own self, we may convey to all about us the invitation to reconciliation with God and one another, a reconciliation that we believe is made concrete and real in the cross of Jesus. We find our Confucian inheritance is given its fullest meaning in this invitation of divine forgiveness and grace at the same time that this Confucian inheritance opens up new insights for us into the gospel itself.

- (6) The providential role of the religions. We are convinced that all religions and traditions in human history that have contributed to human well-being have and do play a providential role, a role given them by God. Confucianism, for instance, has given a cohesive sense of common identity to a large human community, fostered meaningful relations of reciprocity amongst people, contributed a powerful awareness of the goodness of Heaven and the dignity of humans, rejected the ways of violence, dissipation and arrogance, and strengthened a sense of care for one another and for the world about us. To be sure, all religions and traditions also have their dark underside which is subject to God's judgment. Does this providential role apply to them not only in so far as they simply exist and perform such positive functions, but even in so weighty a matter as their rejection of the gospel? It is not for us to define the final meaning of divine providence with respect to all religions and traditions. We wrestle with this question in the way that Paul did in Romans 9–11 where he asked the question about the meaning of Israel's existence not only in its faithfulness to the covenant but also in its rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

UNSETTLED ISSUES

We are fully aware that most of those with whom we share the Confucian heritage do not also share with us in the Christian heritage. As a result there are many unsettled and unsettling questions that remain in our mutual relationship. We shall briefly outline some of these.

- (1) We shall put the most unsettling question first, since all other unsettled questions we discover are in one way or another related to this. As one leading thinker of Confucian persuasion said in all candor to one member of our group, "It is the finality of a crucified Jesus that we cannot understand and accept." We ask ourselves, why is this so? Have we misunderstood our own Confucian heritage? Do they misinterpret the Christian gospel? Is there an incompatibility here, whether imagined or actual, that we must more fully explore? Of course, we know that the gospel is not simply the stamp of approval of any culture, view or religion, and that it introduces a radical reorientation to life whenever and wherever it takes hold. This was the case in the earliest church when some of those of Jewish inheritance considered the gospel incompatible with that inheritance. To what degree are we in a similar situation here, or is it quite different?
- (2) Close to the heart of this problem is the Confucian understanding of Heaven. Heaven is a particularly complex idea in Chinese thought. It can mean on one side simply nature and on the other God. In between these are many shades of meaning, the most important of which for our concerns is the autonomous and spontaneous cosmic order of creativity and harmony.

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All three of these senses have had their place in Confucian parlance. For Confucius Heaven indicated the ultimate source of all things, including the moral order, and had clearly personal features as it gave mandates and responded to human initiatives. In later Confucian thought, especially from the 12th century on, it gained a primarily impersonal sense as a spontaneous creative cosmic principle that was the source of all things and which expressed itself at the human level as a moral awareness. Thus, though we see powerful echoes in the Confucian tradition of a personal understanding of Heaven which appears fully open to a biblical understanding of God, for most of intellectual Confucian history the concept of Heaven has lacked this openness. In any case, it seems that God in the sense of creator of all things is not a necessary characteristic of the Confucian understanding of Heaven.

- (3) Also close to the heart of this problem is the perception of human nature. There is no question but that historically the Confucian tradition has accented the positive in its understanding of human nature and its possibility. Yet, it is not without recognition of a certain ambivalence in human nature, and a certain inability to attain the ideal. We find our Confucian inheritance given a greater depth of meaning through our Christian understanding of human fallibility, and the grounding of our perfectibility within the sphere of the divine initiative, within a framework of relationship to God, within the structures of faith and gift. Conversely, we find the insistence within our Confucian tradition on the dignity of the human, the representative role humanity plays in the world on behalf of Heaven, and

the irreducible place for human effort important and salutary concerns that we gladly embrace.

- (4) A further issue concerns the role of inner discipline within Confucian practice. A unique emphasis within the Confucian understanding of the spiritual life is to foster the development of incipient moral qualities intrinsic to human nature through self-reflection and self-cultivation. The Confucian inner moral discipline, in affirming the essential goodness of human nature or, where evil propensities are more frankly acknowledged, in affirming the malleability of human nature in the direction of the good through moral education and discipline, can lead to a deep moral awareness that permeates the entire range of knowledge, focusing the will and rightly ordering one's emotive life. Is there something to learn from this tradition? Can the Confucian discipline of the observant attention to nature contribute to a deeper Christian awareness of the activity of God's Spirit disclosed in the beauty and ordering of nature? Can the Confucian sense of a deeply ingrained moral nature inherent in human being and their sense of moral burden deepen a Christian sense of being created in the image of God? Can the Confucian attention to the emotive openness of the human mind and heart to the whole of reality deepen the Christian's perception of the glory of God's revelation and the gift of redemption received in faith? We think these matters are worthy of careful attention on the part of the Christian.
- (5) Part of the problematic relationship that exists between our Christian and Confucian inheritance, we believe, is historically rooted.⁵ On the one hand, the Christian faith

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has been often but mistakenly identified, even by many Christians, with Western culture. This identification has given rise to the supposition of a necessary correlation between Western imperialism and the Christian doctrines of God as creator and the finality of Jesus Christ. It has also given rise to the sense that Christian faith is inherently alien to Chinese culture. In addition, it has been assumed that Christian faith and teaching is necessarily tied to Western categories and modes of thought and incompatible with East Asian patterns of thought. This suggests to us that a major task for the future is to articulate our Christian heritage in an authentic East Asian way. We commit ourselves to the furthering of this task.

On the other hand, we also recognize that our Confucian heritage has fallen upon hard times in this century, not least because of its public rejection within East Asian cultures themselves. It was deemed irrelevant if not inimical to the development of modern institutions and modern society. This has taken different forms in different contexts, but has nonetheless been devastating for the continuation of any coherent line of Confucian teaching and practice. Recovery from this modern Confucian dilemma, most powerfully experienced in China, is still underway, and its final outcome still unclear. In any case, this fact of the modern dilemma of Confucianism itself and the identification of Christianity with Western culture has helped to intensify the sense of alienation between the two. Christianity is deemed alien, and where the Confucian heritage is embraced it has often been done from a culturally defensive posture.

- (6) One arena in which the problematic relationship between our double inheritance is finding expression is the way the relationship between the individual and the community is developed. One sees the disintegration of traditional values within many Western societies as well as East Asian ones. How shall that which is shattered be put back together? This may not mean simply reasserting values as traditionally understood. But it will mean fostering values that make community possible and actual. One answer in some East Asian settings, most notably Singapore, is seen in the parallel development of a genuine and broad-based concern of the people for living by values that enhance social well-being and, at another level, an alliance between traditional Confucian morality and political authority. The broad-based concern of the people elicits our commendation. At the same time there is some concern as to the place of a political motivation in the promotion of a Confucian ethic for the sake of social order. Whether the solution currently espoused by Singapore, for example, is the right answer may be questioned. But it is clear that the people of East Asia are challenged today to draw upon their heritage, and for us this means both our Confucian and Christian heritage, to articulate a relationship between individual and community that fosters human well-being and promotes mutual trust within society.
- (7) The delicate ecological balances in our world are under stress. This is of urgent concern to both Christian and Confucian. The West has often been seen to relate to the natural by way of "mastering" and the East by way of "adjusting." There is some truth to this, especially

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as we see the way economic capitalism and industrialization have been relentless in their exploitation of the earth's resources. To be sure, technology also provides resources to address these most complex ecological problems. It may be that Confucian and Christian together can help to create a climate of thought and commitment that will contribute to a constructive balance between mastering and adjusting. "Adjustment" may not adequately express the Confucian viewpoint, especially if it is seen in a negative and passive sense. There is in Confucianism a profound sense of the nurturing care of Heaven that penetrates (*t'ung*) all things. This elicits a human care for all things. So attuned to this care for all things was one leading Confucian of the past that even the sight of a broken tile gave a sense of pathos. With a deep commitment to harmony the Confucian sees the human as forming a trinity with Heaven and Earth. How we can mutually instruct ourselves on the basis of our double inheritance in these matters is not so much a matter of controversy as one that awaits further exploration.

- (8) One issue has only recently begun to stir amongst those committed to their Confucian inheritance. This is the role of women within the Confucian ethos. Traditionally, Confucianism has clearly favored male dominance. Of course, Confucian tradition is not alone in this. But, just as we have discovered an essential critique of male dominance to lie close to the heart of the Christian faith (one thinks of justification and the equality of persons announced by the gospel), so also are we discovering incipient critiques of male dominance

within our Confucian heritage.⁶ We look with eagerness to further developments in this area.

- (9) Finally, we wish to touch on an issue that impacts our congregations in the most concrete and direct way. This has to do with the issue of the veneration of ancestors. Large segments of the East Asian population still adhere to the practice of ancestor veneration. It also forms one of the most formidable obstacles to accepting the invitation of the gospel. Why? Because to become Christian, it is felt, is to be faithless to one's ancestors. This, it seems, strikes at the cultural roots of one's very identity. As one of our case studies indicates,⁷ this is a matter which from the side of our Christian inheritance needs considerable imaginative reworking. In any case, not until this issue is addressed in an amicable and meaningful way will the Christian faith be able to exist within East Asian society as an accepted and companionable way of being East Asian.

PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

We begin by pointing to one matter that has not been adequately addressed in the process as presently carried out. Confucianism has been isolated out from the broader cultural context. In fact, to take China as a case in point, Confucianism has historically existed in a perpetual context of give and take with the Taoist tradition. These two together are the common contribution of East Asia as a whole to world culture. These two, moreover, exist in many different permutations in the different societies of East Asia as they

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have interacted with the differing local traditions—shamanism in Korea and Shinto in Japan for instance—and with the changing forms of Buddhism throughout. In fact, one might question part of the assumption under which this study has been carried out. That assumption is to isolate specific traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Confucian, Traditional) in a way congenial to the reigning interfaith dialogue model. In the case of East Asia, this imposition of pre-ordained categories is not always helpful. It may cloud the issue of the complexity of the reality on the ground and has something of an elitist bias to it. Ought not East Asia also be considered in a more holistic way, which does not so rigidly separate the traditions as the present model does?

We are deeply grateful for the opportunity this study process has given us for a beginning reflection in the Confucian-Christian conversation. We feel, however, that it is only a beginning. Keeping this in mind, we would like to propose the following matters for consideration:

- (1) That serious consideration be given to seeking ways to learn from current innovative efforts that are being initiated, such as the one case study outlined. To our knowledge, this is one of the few such initiatives that are in existence. The outcomes of this approach can have potentially revolutionary significance for the ministry of the gospel throughout our congregations. Is there some way in which this model can be further explored and discussed amongst the congregations? If some such activity were to be carried out we would however want to caution that too much show-casing of a single fragile initiative could be detrimental to the initiative itself. It must be handled with great care and sensitivity.

- (2) In this very dynamic time for East Asia it would seem wise and beneficial to enable a more long-term process in which issues laid bare in this study could be explored in greater depth and with greater methodological integrity. One approach that might be of great assistance to the East Asian Christian community would be to establish a core of persons on the Christian side who meet over time with counterparts identified and selected for this purpose. We are thinking here specifically of the Christian-Confucian conversation. Here a sustained exchange could take place in a way that has not been possible up till the present. Other international initiatives are more academic in orientation. We are looking for a process that impacts the life and faith of the church. This kind of conversation cannot be done at second hand—by specialists, for instance, who act on their own behalf and are not accountable to the Christian community in any clearly defined way.
- (3) Some way to engage the reality of Taoism and folk religious tradition (which includes elements of Buddhism as well) needs to be found. It is a well-known fact that the East Asian religious traditions tend readily to accept a syncretic form of practice that is not consistent with any of the canonical traditions in themselves, yet makes use of resources from all. In this case, a form of study will be sought which takes regions in terms of their whole, rather than in terms of isolated “traditions.” Such a study will get closest to the context where the church lives and exists.
- (4) In light of point 3, careful attention should be paid to current on-going efforts in the Lutheran community in East Asia. For instance, the China Lutheran Seminary

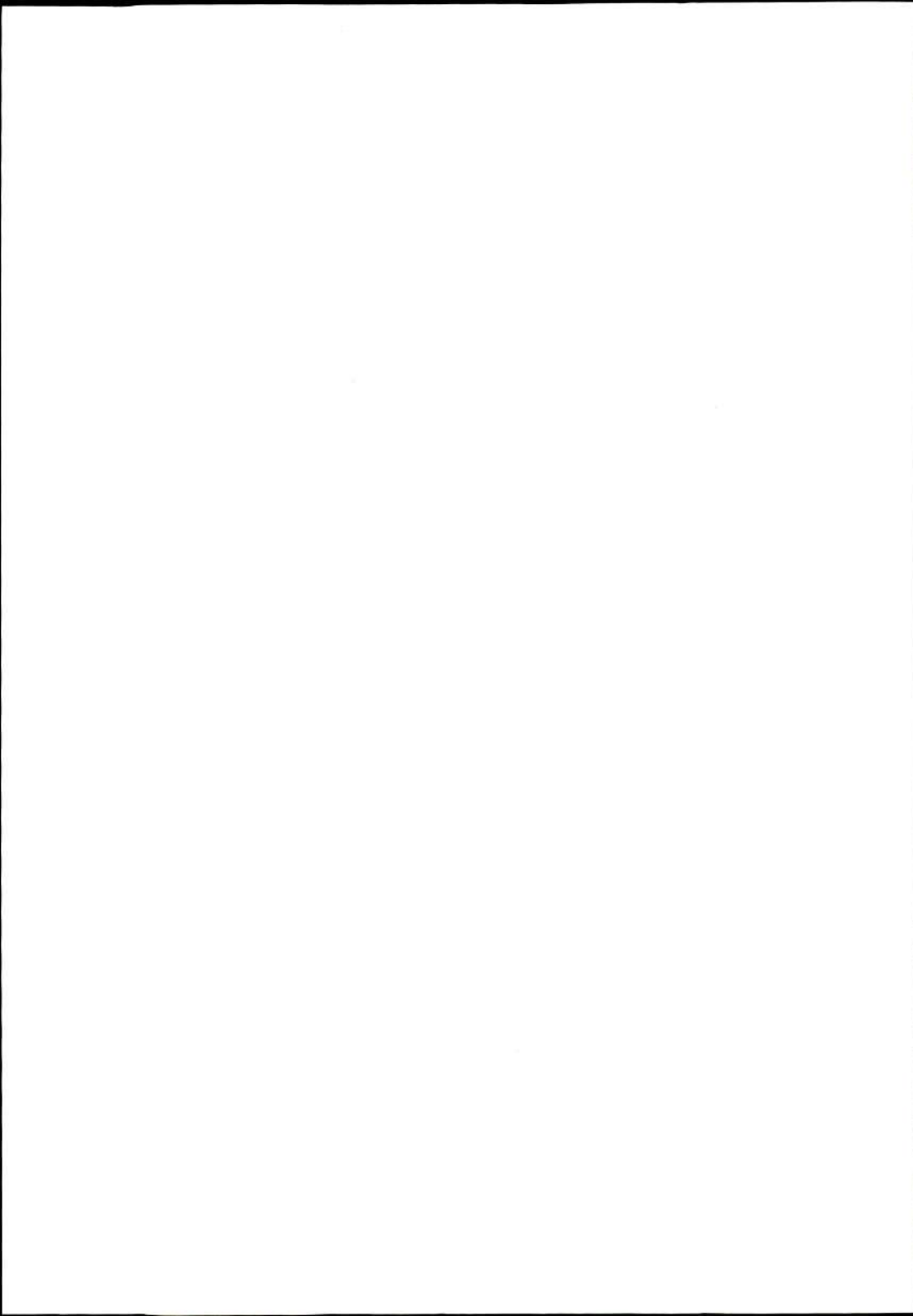
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has an important program developing for the study of religions in Taiwan. There are counterparts in Hong Kong which will continue to be a strategic location for the study of and dialogue with the Confucian and other commitments in China as a whole. There may be ways to link up with the Lutheran Church in Korea for similar purposes there. Ways should be found to foster study and dialogue at the local level in terms of the religious reality as it impacts the church in these areas. Also to be kept in mind are appropriate counterparts in Japan as well as current on-going efforts in Canada and the United States to relate Christianity and Confucianism. For greatest effectiveness this should be linked with the theological continuity provided by a regional-international effort as identified in point 2 above.

- (5) Attention should be given to other initiatives that may parallel those of this study group. One thinks of the current LWF China Study, and of specific initiatives at some seminaries in East Asia. While we know of no initiative that has addressed the particular concerns of this group, there may be ways to not simply enlarge but to inter-relate and so enrich the kind of conversation, research, study and application that needs to be done.

NOTES

- ¹ We use the term inheritance and its cognates throughout with the Chinese term *ch'uan-t'ung* in mind. *Ch'uan* conveys the sense of transmission over time, that is, continuity amidst change, and *t'ung*, conveys the sense of a harmonious whole and integrity. Every generation of Confucian scholars took it upon themselves as a heavenly ordained burden to guard and nurture this heritage lest it be lost, distorted or disintegrated. Heritage implies this highly subjective engagement and as such, it is a dynamic concept unlike the English term which might convey a sense of an inert deposit.
- ² See C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961).
- ³ See Appendix III, Confucianism in Korea.
- ⁴ While the word "divine" has important different connotations in Western tradition and in Chinese, there is nonetheless a very strong assertion of continuity between Heaven or the divine realm and humanity. See for instance Mencius 7B.25, citing the translation of D.C. Lau: "To be great and be transformed by this greatness is called 'sage'; to be sage and to transcend the understanding is called 'divine.'" As a contemporary example we refer to Tu Wei-ming who writes: "In theological terms the Confucian idea of learning to be human suggests a possibility for human beings to become 'divine' through personal endeavour." See *Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual* (Singapore: IEAP, 1989):143 and footnote 11. The precise meaning intended is still a matter of controversy.
- ⁵ See Appendix IV, A Brief Chronology of the History of Conflict Between Christianity and Confucianism.
- ⁶ See Appendix V, Women in Confucianism.
- ⁷ See Appendix VI, The Gospel Hits Home in a Hakka Village: The Case of O-Mei Congregation.



APPENDIX I

MEMBERS OF THE GROUP

Dr Wi Jo Kang (wjk)

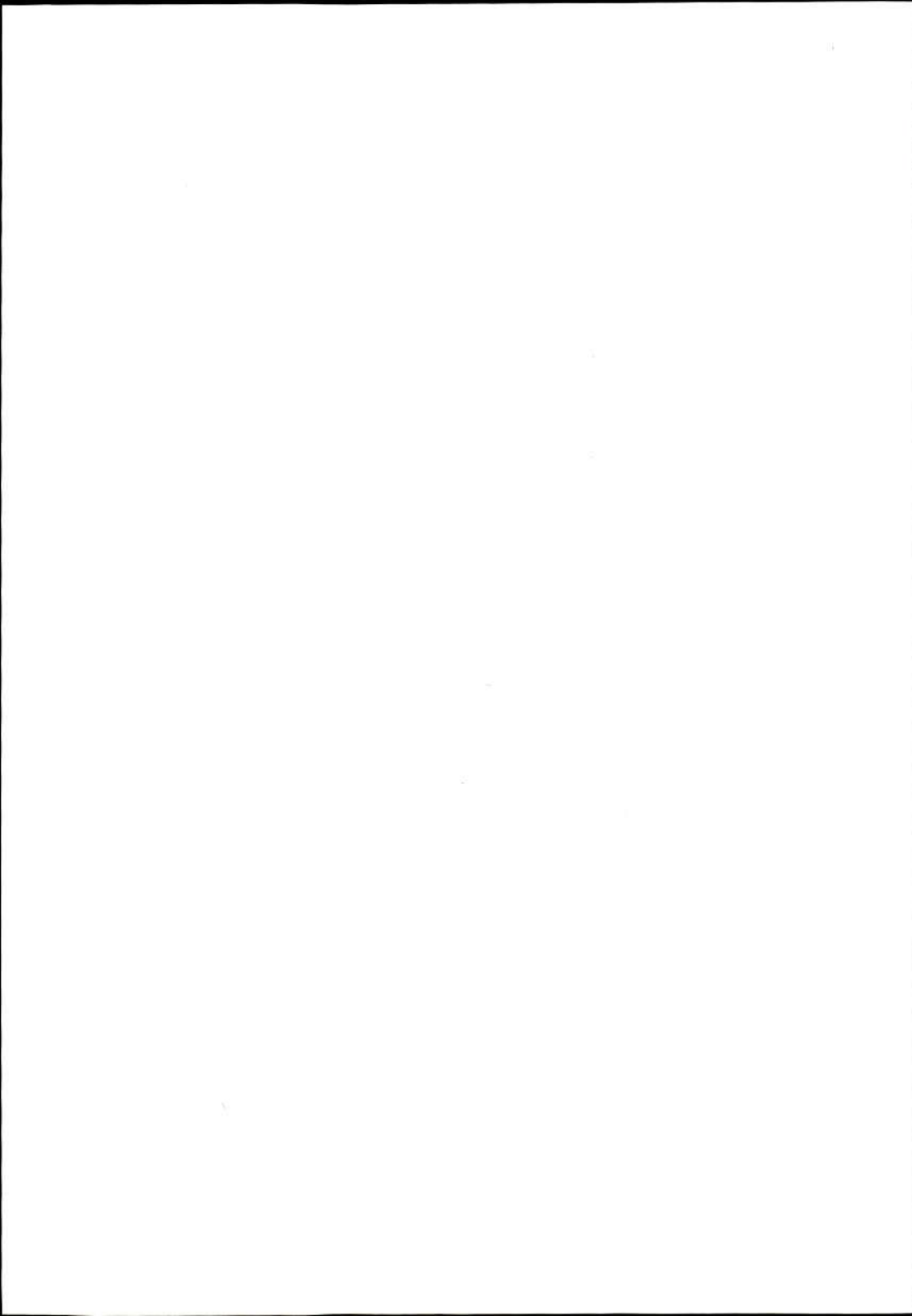
Dr (Sister) Sung-Hae Kim (shk)

Dr Thomas In-sing Leung (isl)

Dr Paul Varo Martinson (pvm)

Dr Choong Chee Pang (ccp)

Dr Thomas Chi-Ping Yu (cpy)



APPENDIX II

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- "The History of Christian–Confucian Relations and Its Lessons for Lutherans Today (with special reference to Korea)." (wjk/8.93)
- "The Place of Confucianism Within Korean Society Today." (wjk/8.93)
- "Christian–Confucian Relations and Celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Family Context." (wjk/7.93)
- "Christian Social Spirituality of Women in the Confucian and Taoist Culture of East Asia." (shk/7.95)
- "Thoughts on Confucianism in the Modern World." (Peter Lee and Wong Wai-ying/8.93)
- "The Issues, Concerns and Directions in the Light of Prior International as Well as Local Conferences and Dialogues Involving Confucianism and Christianity." (Peter Lee/8.93)
- "Theological Reflections in a Chinese Context." (isl/8.93)
- "Participatory Learning—A Chinese Way." (isl/8.93)
- "Contemporary Studies of Confucianism in the Asian Context and the Questions They Raise for Christians." (isl/8.93)
- "The Contemporary Chinese Critique of Christian Theology." (isl/8.95)

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"An Update on Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue with Special Reference to the Confucian Tradition." (pvm/8.93)

"Common Space Between Confucian and Christian." (pvm/8.93)

"Identifying Some Focal Issues in the Christian–Confucian Conversation." (pvm/7.95)

"The Current Place of Confucianism Within Society in Singapore." (ccp/8.93)

"What Is at Stake for the Lutheran Church and its Congregations in Our Relationship with the Confucian Tradition: Taiwan as a Case Study." (Cpy/8.93)

"Confucian–Christian Dialogue in Singapore." (ccp/7.95)

"Filial Piety and Chinese Pastoral Care." (cpy/8.93)

"Theology of Filial Piety: An Initial Formulation." (cpy/8.93)

"Chinese Filial Piety Against the Impact of Modernity: A Christian–Confucian Re-vision." (cpy/7.95)

APPENDIX III

CONFUCIANISM IN KOREA (SHK)

Confucianism in contemporary Korea has a sustaining and pervasive influence in social life. According to the Gallup polls (1987, 1989), only 0.5% of South Koreans identify themselves as Confucians. Yet, Confucian influence upon family ethics, including the understanding of the role of husband and wife, can be estimated to be from 70–90%. Confucianism is, in fact, a spiritual bond which ties Christians (26.2%), Buddhists (20.9%) and those without religious affiliation (51%). Confucianism may prove to be a spiritual bond between North and South Koreans because it is reported that most Koreans perform ancestor rites for their deceased parents.

The two most distinctive marks Confucianism has left upon the ordinary life of Koreans are the funeral and sacrificial rites for the dead, and the respect for seniors, who have a kind of social authority. The prevalent Korean practice of the Confucian sacrificial rites presents a challenge to the Christian churches to give serious attention to how to adopt and Christianize it. The respect for seniors brings about a desirable custom of yielding to the elders, but it also causes conflicts and oppression within a family and in the wider society.

Even though Confucian teaching came first to the Korean peninsula around the 4th century, it was from the 16th

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century onwards that the neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi, which was adopted as the state ideology of the Yi Dynasty (1392–1910), penetrated the daily life of ordinary people. This happened through spreading Confucian education and ritual practices, and by community pacts made in the rural areas. After 1910, Confucianism lost its political patronage, and the accusation was leveled that it was the main obstacle to modernization. Confucianism in Korea, however, withstood these criticisms and has survived both as a school of thought and as a pervasive norm of life. There has also been a recovery of the original insights of Confucius and the classics, in addition to their contemporary interpretation.

APPENDIX IV

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORY OF CONFLICT BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND CONFUCIANISM (WJK)

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| 635 | The first missionary, Alopen, a Nestorian Christian from Syria, arrived in Changan, (Xian), the capital city of China. |
| 781 | Xian inscription indicates Syrian New Testament known in China. |
| 845 | Severe persecution of Nestorian Christians in China by Taoist emperor Wu Tsung. |
| 1266 | Kublai Khan of Yuan dynasty in China requested 100 religious teachers from the pope. The pope sent two Dominicans to China. |
| 1278 | Pope sent five Franciscans to Beijing and established the papal embassy. |
| 1349 | Nestorians expanded in China with 250 dioceses. |
| 1358 | Emperor Tamerlane began to destroy Christians in China. |
| 1368 | Ming dynasty replaced Yuan dynasty in China, and Christianity disappeared in China. |
| 1521 | First Christians from Spain celebrated first mass in Philippines. |

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- 1530 First Portuguese priests on merchant ships arrived in Vietnam.
- 1549 First missionary, Francis Xavier, began missionary work in Japan.
- 1551 First mission established by Portuguese Catholics in Singapore and Malaysia.
- 1552 F. Xavier died at Shang Chuan Island in China.
- 1557 First Portuguese Christians started the settlement in Macao.
- 1571 Mass Christian conversions under the leadership of Omura Sumitada in Japan.
- 1576 Catholics re-entered China. Macao became a Portuguese diocese.
- 1580 The Jesuit Ruggieri came to Canton with Portuguese merchants. Ruggieri taught the Portuguese merchants to observe the formalities of Confucian etiquette.
- 1582 Matteo Ricci began his missionary work in Macao.
- 1586 Jesuit priest Alonso Sanchez drafted "evangelistic" scheme for the military conquest of China.
- 1587 First persecution of Christians in Japan.
- 1588 A Catholic diocese was established in Japan.
- 1594 Gregorio de Cespedes came to Korea with invading Japanese army.
- 1600 Matteo Ricci arrived in Beijing and closely associated with Confucian literati.

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- 1610 Matteo Ricci died in Beijing, leaving lasting impression of cordial relationship between Christianity and Confucianism. Ricci allowed Chinese Christians to observe the ancestral rites; there were 2,000 Catholics in Beijing when he died.
- 1614 Japanese edict prohibited Christianity in Japan. Missionaries were deported, over 40,000 Christians martyred.
- 1617 Second persecution of Christians in Japan.
- 1621 Dominican missionaries began first missionary work in Taiwan.
- 1624 All Spaniards expelled from Japan.
- 1628 German Jesuit, Adam Schall, entered Ming China.
- 1630 1,900 Japanese Christians martyred. Small number of Catholics hid in isolated mountains and islands as *Gakure Kiristan*, or hidden Christians.
- 1633 Franciscan missionary, Santa Maria, began work in China.
- 1637-1638 Shimabara Catholic revolt in Japan.
- 1639 All Portuguese and Jesuits expelled from Japan.
- 1643 Catholic missionaries in China appeal to the office of papacy to solve the ancestral rites controversy.
- 1648 Dominican missionary Caprias martyred in China for his rejection of ancestor worship.

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- 1666-1668 Jesuits and some non-Jesuit Catholic missionaries in China support Matteo Ricci's method of missionary work to allow the Chinese to observe the Confucian rites.
- 1692 Emperor Kang-hsi promulgated an edict of toleration of Christianity.
- 1692 The decree of freedom of worship for all Christians in China was proclaimed by the government.
- 1700 Emperor Kang-hsi recognized the Jesuit view of Confucian rites.
- 1704 The persecution of Christians began throughout China.
- 1715 Pope Clemence XIV prohibited the practice of Confucian rites.
- 1742 Pope Benedict XI prohibited the practice of ancestral rites.
- 1742 The papacy rejected Jesuit practice of Confucian rites and supported Dominican and Franciscan ban of ancestral rites.
- 1785 Catholicism was introduced to Korea by Korean Confucian envoys to China.
- 1790 Korean government persecuted Catholics for the Christian refusal to participate in ancestor worship.
- 1801 Catholics persecuted in Korea. Father Chu, the Chinese priest, died in Korea.
- 1807 Robert Morrison began the first Protestant missionary work in China under the auspices

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- of the London Missionary Society. (By 1818 he had translated the Bible and he completed a Chinese-English dictionary in 1834.)
- 1810 American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was organized and sent missionaries to China in subsequent years.
- 1842 Treaty of Nanjing and opening of China.
- 1843 Taiping movement begun by Hung Hsiu Chuan.
- 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry's naval expedition to Japan.
- 1856 Townsend Harris, the first U.S. minister to Japan arrived and regularly conducted Anglican worship services at his residence.
- 1858 Treaty between U.S. and Japan, opening Japan to Christian missionary work.
- 1865 China inland mission, founded by Hudson Taylor.
- 1866 U.S.S. Sherman burnt on Daedong River near Pyongyang, and severe persecution of Catholics in Korea.
- 1866 Persecution of 25,000 Korean Catholics, mainly for Korean Catholics' refusal of ancestor worship.
- 1868 Meiji Imperial Restoration in Japan and worship of the ancestral spirits of imperial family was imposed for all Japanese citizens.
- 1873 Edict against Christianity removed in Japan.
- 1875 Doshish University was founded in Kyoto, Japan.

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- | | |
|------|---|
| 1882 | The U.S.-Korea Treaty. |
| 1884 | Dr Horace N. Allen, the first resident Presbyterian missionary, began medical missionary work in Korea. |
| 1885 | The Rev. Horace Underwood, the first Presbyterian clergy missionary, and the Rev. Henry Appenzeller, the first Methodist missionary, began work in Korea. |
| 1907 | Massive revival movement in Korea. |
| 1910 | One Million Souls Movement began in Korea. |
| 1914 | Protestant and Anglican missionaries number 5,462 in China, "the largest mission field." |
| 1917 | An indigenous church, True Jesus Church, was founded in China. |
| 1927 | Church of Christ in China, the union of seven Protestant denominations was founded. |
| 1929 | Five Year Movement, a mass evangelical movement, began by National Christian Council of China. |
| 1930 | Kagawa Toyohiko began "Kingdom of God Movement" in Japan. Ended in 1934. |
| 1935 | The Japanese government ordered all educational institutions in Korea to attend Shinto shrine ceremonies. |
| 1936 | The Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome instructed the Catholics in the Japanese Empire to accept the government order to participate in Shinto ceremonies. |

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- 1940 All Protestant Churches in Japan were forced to unite in Nihon Kirisito Kyodan, United Church of Christ.
- 1983 The consultation on the Christian Response to Ancestor Practices, held in Taipei, Taiwan from December 26–31.

APPENDIX V

WOMEN IN CONFUCIANISM (SHK)

Confucianism has been accused of offering an ideology of oppression of women in East Asia. "Women can be made to follow but they cannot be taught to understand" is how one saying goes. Economically, a woman was always dependent upon her father, then her husband, and then her son; politically, she belonged to them, as daughter, wife, or mother, without legal rights nor titles. Even in her own self-awareness she always was an inferior being who had to stay in the sphere of her home, doing the simple tasks of housework, while entrusting the outside world to the men. This low self-esteem and the traditional notion of the "Three Followings" (of father, husband, and son) seem to have been a negative factor in the self-image of women, even up to the present.

Studies show that, although Korean Protestant women are very active in Bible study and subsidiary service in the church, only 16.3% actually participate in the planning and policy-making processes of the church. In church assemblies, only 3% speak often and 30.1% speak once in a while. 34.7% never speak and 32.2% seldom, because they think that the roles of men and women are different. This survey interprets this to mean that Christian women in South Korea are still influenced by the Confucian ideology, and this is reinforced by the Pauline advice that women be quiet in

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church assembly. Interestingly enough, 86.9% however agree that God created men and women equal, even though 78.7% believe that the roles of men and women are different, and 24.7% agree that women have fewer leadership qualities than men. Because of these conflicts in understanding, 84.5% of Protestant women think that there is no discrimination in the church, although the actual number of women ministers is small or non-existent. It was concluded that there is a paradox in the consciousness of Christian Korean women and that the solution was in the right interpretation of the Bible and of cultural tradition.

In another study, the surveyors noted with surprise that 93.1% of women indicate that the kind of education stemming from the Yi dynasty is still helpful to them because it offers a practical guide for peaceful coexistence in the family and for the education of the children.

Doubtless the women studied were far more conservative than the researchers who did the survey. The results can be given a very negative assessment. But we should not uncritically make the Confucian tradition more oppressive than it really is. If we begin with the basic Confucian assumption of human dignity and then interpret the texts, taking into account different lines of development, we may then be able to understand the original intent of Confucius, Mencius, Hsun Tzu and the neo-Confucians of East Asia in a way that contributes to our modern understanding of women.

The basic maxim of Confucius' teaching is "cultivate yourself and thereby bring peace and security to the other" (*hsiu-chi an-jen*, Analects 14.42). People's lives are always looked at in the context of their community, which provides support

and enrichment. For Confucius, politics is no more than making human relationships right, and all human activity has a political dimension. This is at the heart of Confucius' theory of "the rectification of names" (*chen-ming*). Mencius developed it into the "Five Relations" (*wu-lun*). It was Tung Chung-shu who first formulated the inherently oppressive notion of "Three Bonds" (*san-kang*). I will trace its development and indicate why it must be rejected as oppressive.

Asked by the Duke of Ch'i about government, Confucius presented the famous socio-ethical principle, "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son" (Analects 12.11). Everyone in society has a relational name and one has to be faithful to that name and its inherent content, letting it serve as an appropriate guide to one's behavior. In other words, rights and responsibilities go together, and all have a duty to exercise their power correctly. Confucius further described the proper qualities required: the ruler needs propriety in dealing with his subjects, the subject sincere loyalty, the father tolerant affection, the son respectful filial piety. It is obvious that women such as mothers and daughters are included in the formula, and it would be incorrect to interpret Confucius as excluding women from the principle of reciprocity. It is clearly implied that the mother should be a mother and the daughter a daughter.

It was Mencius who first mentioned the "Five Relations" of close affection between father and son, rightness between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and fidelity between friends (Mencius 3A.4). Distinction between the husband and the wife does not necessarily indicate subjection nor the

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division of roles between household and outside society, which was formalized in the *Book of Rites* written during the Han dynasty (BC 206–220 AD). Distinction is to be respected by propriety, which aims at mutual harmony and the promotion of life.

No doubt some will criticize this interpretation because of the heavy social burden that was placed upon East Asian women historically. But reinterpretation seems more appropriate in this case than outright rejection. The seeming paradox in the way Korean Protestant women hold to the notion of distinction while upholding equality indicates that the image continues to survive into the present. Each age must interpret such images in a fitting way.

While the "Five Relations" should be preserved through reinterpretation, the "Three Bonds" of Tung Chung-shu should be rejected. The binary system of yin and yang was applied to every aspect of life. The ruler, the father, and the husband became the norm as the yang to which the interior yin must always be subject. Tung Chung-shu reconstructed Confucian teaching on the basis of the yin–yang and "Five Elements" theory to suit the absolutist monarchy of his day and transformed an ethic of mutual responsibility to a one-sided, oppressive ideology. The "Three Bonds" theory was adopted in official state documents of the Han and later societies of East Asia as the formula of "Three Bonds and Five Relations," which interpreted the latter in terms of the former. There seems to be almost consensus today that we should reject the theory of the Three Bonds as the byproduct of a monarchical period, while reinterpreting the theory of the Five Relations in terms of Confucius' meaning and in the light of the contemporary commitment to human rights and equality.

The neo-Confucian emphasis on the "investigation of things and extension of knowledge" (*ke-wu chih-chih*) can be understood in the sense of moral and cultural education. At the very beginning of learning one starts with an aspiration to grasp the right principle in concrete situations. When a person truly knows what is right and wrong, and discerns when to act or withdraw at each particular moment, s/he may be said to have attained the principle of things. If this kind of moral judgment is made repeatedly, after some time and effort all human and cosmic affairs begin to become transparent and one's understanding becomes clear and penetrating. Chu Hsi called this state of perfected knowledge "enlightenment" or "knowing heaven." That is, one discerns that the multitude of things, if finally understood, are interconnected with one principle tying everything together. In this state of knowing, one perceives the reason why things are as they are and the right way to act. Whatever one does will be performed in perfect harmony with the mandate of heaven.

In their ethical theory, the neo-Confucians gave concrete expression to the distinction between the heart as guided by human desire (*jen-hsin*) and the heart as guided by the Way (*tao-hsin*). The first refers to the private desires of the person as a psycho-physical being, and the second to the universal moral sense bestowed by heaven. In this view, the heart of the Way should be master and controller of the heart of human desire. As long as the latter heeds the former, human actions, from the initial motivation to the actual expression itself, will keep to the golden mean. The neo-Confucian practice of quiet sitting and constant reverence were ways to preserve the balance between the inchoate and manifest moments of the human heart. Since women, just as well as

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men, can be sages, this process of human maturation is applied to women in the same way as to men, the details being open to changing times and situations.

Actually, it was the ideal of the sage which was placed before women in the Confucian textbooks for women in the Chosen Period, such as the *Admonitions for Women*, written in 1475 by Han, King Songjong's mother. "You should not be satisfied with the household works of threading, etc., but should aim at the state of sagehood." This goal, for both men and women in the Confucian tradition, reflects its egalitarian basis. This is so, despite the many historical injustices imposed upon women.

APPENDIX VI

THE GOSPEL HITS HOME IN A HAKKA VILLAGE: THE CASE OF O-MEI CONGREGATION (CPY)

In the historical encounter between Christianity and Confucianism the thorniest issue in bringing the gospel to the Chinese has been the question of ancestor worship. According to Confucian precepts, the chief duty of the son was keeping the family line unbroken and continually burning incense for the ancestors (*Tzu-hsien-hsiang-buo-pu-tuan*). When Matteo Ricci came to China during the time of the Ming dynasty he saw the Chinese reverence of ancestors as a social custom, rather than as a religious rite. Later, when Ricci's opponents charged that his position was a concession to idolatrous practices, and consequently secured a papal order, which prohibited that the Chinese Christians engage in ancestor worship, it angered Emperor Kang-hsi of the Ch'ing dynasty, who was sympathetic toward Christianity and who thereupon decreed a ban on all missionary activity in China. Ever since this tragic event Christianity has been stigmatized as a religion that demands from its followers to deny their ancestors. And this stigma became and still is the biggest obstacle for the Chinese to open themselves to the Christian gospel.

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Among the population of 21 million in Taiwan, Protestants and Catholics represent a little less than 4%. Recent statistics show that 38% of the aboriginal population are Christians, 67% of the Mandarin-speaking, 0.85% of the Taiwanese-speaking, and 0.3% of the three million Hakkanese-speaking. This means that of the four ethnic groups in Taiwan the Hakkan are the least evangelized. The main reason is that the Hakkan are a very close-knit ethnic group which is most conscious of and adheres most tightly to their tradition of which ancestor worship constitutes the core.

O-Mei village has a population of about 7,000. It is a typical, predominantly Hakka community. There is only one church there which used to be Roman Catholic; it is located at the entrance to the village. In the past, the villagers saw the church and its activities as something alien to their tradition and way of life. Because of the villagers' persistent indifference and resistance to its work, the church did not make any headway and was eventually closed down.

In 1983, the Chinese Grassroots Mission, together with six Hakka congregations in the east district of Hsinchu, saw the need for evangelizing the rural Hakka communities, and sent Pastor and Mrs Fan Pin-tien to begin their work in O-Mei. Pastor Fan felt that the closed-down Catholic church building was a good place for starting his ministry. Later, he rented the whole compound for one NTD per year.

Pastor Fan and his wife are a very dedicated Hakka couple, passionate about bringing the gospel to their compatriots, thoughtful and talented. Their strategy for reaching and shepherding the people in the community is as follows:

- Because a larger number of villagers is elderly, the Fans make it their first task to serve them by regularly visiting

them and meeting their pastoral care needs; they also provide transportation to enable medical attention.

- Retaining the original altar and the mosaic behind it, Pastor Fan placed a traditional Chinese altar table in a back corner of the hall. Above it he put the short essay, "The Treasury of Life" (*Sheng-ming-chih-pao*), written by Emperor Kang-hsi. On top of the essay there is a horizontal votive tablet with the words, "the Heavenly Father is the origin of all things" (*Tie-fu-shih-wan-wu-chih-yuan*), and on both sides there are vertical inscriptive couplets. In front of the altar there is another table for fellowship, catechetical instruction, and the presentation of food.
- Pastor Fan makes use of the existent Hakka "Three-word Gospel Classic" (*Ke-yu-fu-ying-shang tzu ching*) for catechetical instruction, and recently published a new book on *The Hakka Three-word Gospel Classic and Martin Luther's Small Catechism*.
- He took a good number of familiar Hakka and Taiwanese folk tunes, put essential Christian messages into them, and taught the congregation to sing them. Thus these hymns have become a very dynamic means for communicating and memorizing the message of the gospel.
- Pastor Fan and his research team also started a project of contextualizing Christian rites, such as the order of the funeral service, and the liturgy of ancestor remembrance. He not only published a handbook for these rites, but also began to use them in the Hakka congregations, which welcome such projects.
- In 1994, Hakka Old and New Testaments were published. This Bible contains parallel texts of the

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romanized and literary Hakka texts. The congregation in O-Mei uses the new Hakka Bible.

- Pastor Fan's ministry in O-Mei has been quite successful. He and his wife are very respected and loved by the community. His project of contextualizing the gospel has been effective in making the new and the potential converts feel very much at home with the Christian gospel and the liturgy of O-Mei Christians in which they worship God and pay respect to ancestors.

The O-Mei project of contextualization represents a concrete instance of the Christian–Confucian dialogue. Last year, the O-Mei Congregation set up a new evangelistic station in the neighboring village of San Wan, which had not had a church before. So far, this creative project appears to be effective in reaching the Hakka with the Christian gospel. However, it is still in the experimental stage and requires further evaluation.

APPENDIX VII

THE LORD'S SUPPER IN A FAMILY CONTEXT: A PROPOSAL¹ (WJK)

When persons of Confucian tradition become Christian, the Protestant community expects them to refrain from participating in the time-honored ancestral rites. This often alienates them from their culture and they lose the sense of belonging. It is the responsibility of the Christian community to provide an alternative rather than to simply condemn the Confucian rites altogether.

To provide a Christian alternative to the Confucian rites of ancestor remembrance and filial piety, two proposals are worth considering. The first proposal is "Eucharist at home," and the second "feasts for neighbors." In the first, the Lord's Supper will be celebrated in the family on occasions of family reunions or of important events within the family, especially the remembrance of the passing away of family members and the ancestors' date of death.

In the second proposal the Christian family will provide special meals and feasts, and invite neighbors to share food in memory and honor of deceased grandparents or parents. Thus the Christian family makes a contribution to societal harmony and solidarity, and at the same time demonstrates filial piety.

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These two proposals are not only meant for Christians in Confucian societies so that they may honor their Confucian heritage, but can also provide occasions for Christian love and witness towards all people. These proposals are also consistent with the biblical injunction to remember one's ancestors (Deuteronomy 32:7) and to respect and remember the family lineage (Matthew 1:1-17). Finally, these proposals mean to enhance Christian family life and to take the family and home more seriously. For a great many Christians, Christian life is confined within church structures and centers around a monologue by the preacher or priest. However, Christian life suffers if the nurture of Christ's followers by word and sacrament is the prerogative of the clergy only and occurs in the church building only. Surely, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers must be evident in all phases of Christian life, especially in homes and families. Here we can learn from the Confucian traditions; and these proposals can be a Christian contribution to strengthening the families and to promoting societal harmony and peace in the world.

NOTE

- ¹ While this proposal was not endorsed by the group as a whole we provide it as reference for those interested.

SUMMARY REPORT FROM THE WORKING GROUP ON HINDUISM

INTRODUCTION

This study on the current state of Hindu-Christian relations is undertaken in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, India, by fanatic Hindus in December 1992. Many observers of India have interpreted this event as a turning point in Indian history and as a repudiation of the secular basis of Indian nationhood. The event has certainly caused considerable anxiety in the minds of minority communities. The Ayodhya incident has unleashed a new wave of Hindu nationalism threatening the identity and existence of Muslims and Christians in India. In this situation, it is a natural temptation for Christians in India to adopt a defensive posture and withdraw into a ghetto of their own. Although today Christians are an insignificant demographic minority (2.6% of the population or about 24 million), their presence in India goes back to the first century of the Christian era. The Indian Christian community has not only withstood the vicissitudes of history but has also made a significant contribution to the development of modern India. It is in the broader framework of this history of Christian interaction with the Hindu community in India that we must evaluate the challenges posed by current developments and explore the possibilities of a constructive dialogue with the majority Hindus.

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This study therefore has been undertaken at a crucial time in Indian history. It has sought to explore the current state of relations between Hindus and Christians realistically in the hope that it will serve to stimulate a meaningful interaction between the two communities in India and elsewhere.

The dialogical approach adopted here has come into prominence in Christian interaction with other faiths in recent years. Interreligious dialogue presupposes commitment to one's own faith and openness toward the other. Dialogue is an expression of Christian love for the neighbor and therefore represents a fundamental Christian posture in the world of religious plurality. Furthermore, it is a Christian obligation to understand neighbors of other faiths, and dialogue is the framework within which such an understanding occurs. It is in dialogue that the nature of Christian commitment and the distinctiveness of the gospel are best articulated *in relation to* other faiths and *not over against* them. For Christians, dialogue provides an opportunity to fathom the depth of their own faith, thus enriching their own self-understanding, and at the same time making it communicable and even commendable to others. Dialogue therefore is an unavoidable aspect of Christian existence in the world. It is our hope that this study will be beneficial to all Christian churches in India in a time of threat and promise.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY "HINDUISM"

Hindus constitute more than 80 percent of India's population of over 900 million. It is estimated that about 20 million people form the Hindu diaspora living all over the world but concentrated in such countries as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bali, Malaysia, Fiji, Mauritius, West Indies, Guyana, Africa, Europe and North America.

It is difficult to define who is a Hindu. The name originally comes from "Sindhu," a great river of the Indian sub-continent. Outsiders first called the inhabitants living around this river Hindus. At one stage all the non-whites were called Hindus in the sense that they shared a common culture. The debate on defining the term "Hindu" still continues. Those who hold that the brahmanical Hinduism is the base and cover of all of India's religious traditions try to define Hindus as a political entity, thus excluding Muslims and Christians. But at the same time there are numerous tribal and folk traditions, and many people belonging to these refuse to be identified as Hindus. However, for our purpose here, we take the popular view that Hindus are those—the majority of Indian people—who are different from Muslims, Christians and Zoroastrians, but in terms of their faith(s) and traditions intertwined historically with Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs.

THE COMPLEXITY OF HINDU TRADITIONS

As a complex phenomenon Hinduism is difficult to understand, not only for outsiders but also for insiders. It has no founder, no single scripture and no single creed. It is pan-mythic, comprising a number of traditions, and for

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this reason is compared to a family, a banyan tree and an encyclopedia. Hinduism is old and new, single and multiple, exclusive and inclusive. However, we roughly identify *four* major strands of thought or traditions within Hinduism.

The Vedic Ritual Tradition

Ritual sacrifice was the most central element of Vedic religion as evident in the four Vedas (BC 2500–600). From a simple form of hospitality rites directed to gods, Vedic ritual developed into a complex mechanism that was considered as a generating power, creating and regenerating the universe and all forms of life. The power depended on performing ritual actions in a precise manner (*karma*), on uttering mantras (*brahman*) and producing heat (*tapas*) by establishing fire and cooking oblations. Developing an elaborate institution of priesthood was integral to the belief in these power centers. Faith and trust understood as confidence in and cooperation with the priests were expected of the sacrificers.

The notion of comprehensive order (*rta*, *dharma*) was the underlying basis of Vedic religion. The three dimensions of *ritual order*, *cosmic order* and *social order* were inextricably related to each other. Each person was expected to contribute to the maintenance of this order. The Vedic vision projected a holistic and integrated view of personality and an integral relationship with nature and community. Fulfillment of all desires and a successful life here and now and their perfect measure in heaven (*svarga*) after death depended on regular performance of rituals. However, there was always a tendency to be socially rigid and ritually extravagant.

The Vedic *dharma* with its ritual center has undergone a process of decline and revival. There have been modifications

and new forms of ritual have emerged. However, the fundamental belief that ritual is intrinsically powerful is continuing even today. It is with this notion that special rituals take place with aims like making it rain, gaining a political victory or bringing peace to the world. Besides, ritual in its rigid order is an integral part of worship in Hindu temples. However, there are Hindus who are critical of ritual rigidity and who practice devotion in different ways.

Ascetic Traditions

Originally there were wandering ascetics operating outside the Vedic fold. They believed that the interior power could be activated by controlling the body and its senses. For most of them *karma* meant every action in life with a moral sense, *brahman*, the universal power, and *tapas*, the interior heat. It is these wandering ascetics who developed the theory of the transmigration of souls (*samsara*). They thought that desire was a problem, the root cause of suffering and the chain of births. Proper understanding of the operation of the world, of the structures of the human personality, self-control and right conduct were considered to be the ways of liberation. Non-violence was regarded as one of the cardinal virtues.

The many groups of wandering ascetics each had a distinctive world view, although they shared the above concerns. Among them, the Jains took the most extreme path of austerity, while the Buddhists took a middle path between the Jains and the ritualists. The interaction between ascetics and ritualists led to the refinement of the Hindu tradition. The six philosophical schools of brahmanical Hinduism followed the pattern of the wandering ascetics in developing different views of epistemology, ontology, soteriology and ethics. At

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a practical level techniques of yoga and ethical ideals such as non-violence were incorporated into the Vedic religion. The division of life into four stages (*asrama*), namely those of student, householder, forest dweller, and of complete renunciation, evolved under the influence of ascetics. The latter, on the other hand, were influenced by the ritual tradition as is evident in the ritual practices of Jains and Buddhists, albeit in a modified sense.

Devotional Traditions

In the Vedic religion there were many gods. But by the time we get to the Upanishadic period the idea of a Supreme Reality has begun to emerge. The Vedic religion, as it evolved, interacted with various local cults and traditions, gradually incorporating local divine figures, heroes and leaders as gods. Prominent goddesses were incorporated as consorts of gods, and other local deities were absorbed into the divine families as children. At one stage, the competition for prominence between gods, especially between Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, led to the development of the triadic concept of Trimurti; they were assigned the work of creation, preservation and destruction respectively. Eventually, Brahma ceased to be worshiped, and Vishnu and Shiva became the supreme gods of the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions respectively. Vishnu was regarded as descending in different forms (*avatars*), the most important incarnations being Rama and Krishna. Shiva had the distinctive nature of theophany, that is, brief appearances to devotees and paradoxical presence in their teachers.

The Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions flowered during the period of poet-saints (Nayanars were devotees of Shiva, and Alvars were followers of Vishnu, 4th–14th CE). Each

of the two gods was perceived as the Supreme, doing the works of creation, preservation and destruction. Today, many Hindus interpret the Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions as two ways of understanding the one God, the Supreme Reality. The outpouring devotion of saints is viewed as their response to the gracious initiatives of God in revealing himself, as the means of self-transformation and as the way to liberation and final communion with God. Today, Shaiva and Vaishnava temples are centers for pilgrimage, for re-enacting the mythological stories and for performing ritual and other devotional acts.

The *bhakti* (devotional) tradition which originated in southern India has spread to other parts of the country. Almost every region of India has developed its own distinctive form of devotion, often inspired by poet-saints of the region, and a variety of more popular forms of devotions to local deities and ancillary divinities have emerged.

Goddess-Worship and Other Dalit/Tribal/Popular Traditions

Hindu tradition in its broadest sense today includes diverse cults, tribal and folk traditions. While at one level all these cults have their own distinctive identity, at another level God is viewed as embracing them all within his being. Some of the original or distinctive cult figures have been incorporated into the major traditions of Vaishnavism and Shaivism through a process of myth-making, assigning them the roles of consorts, children or incarnations of Shiva or Vishnu. The cults of some ethno-regional groups, however, have entirely different characteristics from those of Vaishnavism and Shaivism, although certain brahmanical elements have intruded into some of them. Corporate worship, a relaxed notion of taboo, and nature-related

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worship have remained in the popular Dalit cults, but some of their rituals resemble the brahminical ritual. The beliefs of the major traditions, such as *karma/samsara*, are on the whole shared by local cult groups. In addition to worshipping the local deities at shrines, these groups also take part in the worship of gods in major temples.

In recent times, many belonging to diverse local cultic traditions have begun to emphasize their separate identity as a form of social protest against the long-standing caste discrimination and against untouchability. Today there is greater interest in the study and revival of Dalit and tribal religions in India.

The preceding analysis is one way of outlining the Hindu faith(s). Admittedly, there are other ways also. It is helpful to take note that Hindu tradition also displays a tendency to synthesize the various strands described above. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a part of the encyclopedic epic *Mahabharata*, presents all four strands. This synthesis, however, is more celebrated than a careful analysis of the inner logic connecting the four strands. For example, the Vedic duty of ritual sacrifice and the sacrifice of war is affirmed while at the same time the principle of non-violence is upheld. Likewise, the intrinsic power of ritual is accepted while God appears to have the absolute power. There is, however, an attempt in the *Gita* to bring the various activities together at the God-center. Thus one can sacrifice to God or fight in a war by fixing one's mind on God through intense yoga and devotion. Moreover, the *Gita* advocates the view that God is accessible to all, irrespective of the way people approach him.

The synthetic nature of the Hindu religion is acclaimed in the modern period. The *Gita* is considered almost as

important as the Vedas. Several Hindu thinkers in the modern period interpret the *Gita* in such a way that it provides a solution to the problem of religious pluralism, motivates reformation and renaissance, and inspires to incorporate positive elements of Christianity and Islam. The reform and renaissance movements have tried to give practical expression to this synthetic ideal in modern Hindu apologetics.

CONTEMPORARY HINDU REVIVAL

Though Hinduism has maintained an unbroken continuity for over 4000 years, it has experienced periodic revivals. The *bhakti* movement was one such form of revival. During the time of British colonialism Hindu intellectuals attempted to rearticulate their faith in relation to Western and Christian world views. This period is known as Indian Renaissance. The revival has gained additional impetus in post-Independence India, and today, there is a new wave of revival through the emergence of certain nationalistic movements and political groups (such as the Rashtriya Swayam Sevaks, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party). This revival draws its inspiration from Swami Dayanand Saraswathi, the founder of a 19th-century revival movement called Arya Samaj, and the Hindu apologetics of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. The present revival has positive as well as negative aspects.

Positively, the revivalists have contributed to the awakening of the Hindu masses by organized activities. Hindus have been mobilized to engage in social services like education, medical care and various training programs. The revival has also promoted religious teaching and the study of Hindu

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scriptures, emphasized the training of priests, renovated temples and revived rituals.

Negatively, the Hindu revivalists have antagonized minority communities, such as Christians and Muslims. The brahmanical tradition is projected as the eternal way of life (*sanatana dharma*). The exclusive claims of the minorities, such as their belief in one God, are criticized as an ideological weapon to conquer nations and subjugate cultures. The aim of revival movements is to unify all Hindus under one banner. The Ayodhya movement, which led to the destruction of a medieval Muslim mosque, is the best example of their attempts to restore Hindu religious places; these, they think, were desecrated by outside rulers, when they were not outright replaced by mosques or churches. Thus the revivalists are intent on rectifying history and they are promoting cultural nationalism under the ideology of "Hindutva" (Hindu way of life). With the support of the Hindu diaspora, the revival movements actively propagate Hinduism as the eternal religion, not only countering the distinctiveness of Christianity and Islam but also blurring sectarian divisions within Hinduism. The contemporary revival is fostering a form of "pan-Hindu ecumenism" unprecedented in its history. One consequence of these efforts is the politicization of religion and the communalization of politics. This atmosphere of actual and potential interreligious conflict in India has not been conducive to interreligious dialogue and understanding in recent years. Furthermore, the neo-Hindu claim that all religions are essentially the same reduces the need for understanding the faith and traditions of different communities.

And yet, there are voices within Hinduism who have decried the negative dimensions of contemporary revivalism. These

voices have adopted a secularist approach and have pointed out that the revivalists distort the image of Hinduism as that of a tolerant religion. Others, particularly those belonging to the oppressed communities, see in the present movement the revival of Brahmanism reaffirming the "eternal bond" between ritualists and rulers of priestly and princely class. Contemporary Hinduism is thus experiencing a tremendous turmoil within itself.

HINDU-CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER: PAST AND PRESENT

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Hindu-Christian encounter is as old as the religions themselves. This encounter, until relatively recently, took place primarily on the Indian sub-continent, for the most part, at the level of shared culture and daily living. Occasionally, matters of doctrine or philosophy led to theological exchanges between Christians and Hindus.

The early Christian community (Syrian Christians) was mainly confined to the region of Kerala and lived in the midst of the dominant Hindu community, sometimes under Hindu patronage. In this environment Christians encountered Hindus largely in the socio-economic and cultural spheres, where they were pleased to find acceptance at a favorable position within the caste hierarchy of Hindu society. This dialogue with Hinduism was *Christian*-initiated.

More serious encounters between the two traditions, however, did not occur until the arrival of Western colonial powers. The earliest Portuguese colonialists represented

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the strident Iberian Catholicism and, fueled by the post-Tridentine missionary zeal, did not endear themselves to native Hindus nor to Muslims. They were equally intolerant of the Syrian Christians of Kerala. Therefore, this encounter between Christianity and Hinduism has largely elicited a negative response; Christians earned such derogatory epithets as “feringi” and were regarded by the people of other faiths as militant, dogmatic and intolerant.

From the early 17th century onwards, the largely negative response to Christianity was mitigated to a certain extent by the arrival of Robert de Nobili and his policy of friendly encounter and through the conscious efforts made by the Madurai Mission to indigenize Christianity. While de Nobili did not give up the notion that the Christian faith was inherently superior over Hinduism, his openness towards the continued celebration of Hindu festivals and ceremonies by the Christian converts was a positive step towards establishing rapprochement between Hindus and Christians. His greater contribution, perhaps, lies in his efforts at articulating Indian Christian theology in a language and idiom that could be understood, even if only by the learned segment of the Hindu population.

The early 18th century saw the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries from continental Europe. Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the first German Lutheran missionary, who began his work in Tranquebar, evinced great interest to understand and study Hinduism. His sympathetic study of Hinduism received no encouragement from his mission board. Almost a century later, English-speaking Protestant missionaries, first from Britain, later from North America, arrived in India imbued with evangelical fervor. Most of these missionaries displayed antipathy towards Hinduism,

characterizing it as a superstitious, pagan, and idolatrous religion. Nevertheless, they eagerly studied various vernacular languages, even mastered them, producing in some cases, the first grammar books, primers and dictionaries. The efforts of the European orientalists and Indologists at translating sacred Sanskrit texts deserve special mention.

With the emergence of Hindu or Indian Renaissance from the 19th century onwards a cross-fertilization between Hinduism and Christianity begins to occur. The vitriolic attack on Christian missionaries, the introduction of liberal Christian education and the infusion of modern Western rationalism are factors that influenced some Hindu intellectuals to enter into a conversation with Christians. This time the dialogue with Christianity was *Hindu*-initiated. These new apologists of Hinduism were eager to recover the purity of faith which, they maintained, had been overlaid by layers of obscurantism and superstition. The way forward towards a compatible religion necessarily lies in the retrieval of a pure form of Hinduism, and thus the 19th-century reformers attempted to establish the Sanskritic form of Hinduism as normative. They contended that the highest ideals of Vedic Hinduism are easily compatible with the noblest values of Christianity. Religious nationalism proved to be a valuable galvanizing ideology.

Hindu-Christian encounter entered a new phase at the end of Western colonialism in India. During this phase, which in some respects prevails to this day, there has been a greater interest in academic or doctrinal dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. Both Hindu and Christian thinkers have attempted to look at their respective traditions in light of mutual interaction. Some Indian Christian thinkers were eager to keep the lines of communication open between

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the two faiths. The notion of pan-Sanskritic identity promoted by the Hindu reformers and actively supported by the European Orientalists appealed to several Indian Christian thinkers. These thinkers probed the Hindu heritage in search of values and insights that could deepen the Christian understanding of faith. Hindu thinkers on the other hand have tried to interpret their faith in light of modern science and secular values.

CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO HINDUISM

Christians have approached Hindus and their faith(s) from different perspectives. It will be helpful to note the most typical of those approaches.

- (1) *The fundamentalist approach*: According to this approach, Hindus are commonly regarded as heathens living in darkness; they are idol worshipers; they are superstitious in their beliefs and behaviors; the elements of devotion and morality are far inferior to those of Christians. Today, this approach is countered by revivalist Hindus, who try to discredit Christianity by pointing out that it entered India through colonial aggression and used fraudulent means for converting Hindus. These Hindus hold that the Christian gospel is irrelevant or even redundant.
- (2) *The historical approach*: Christians used this approach in order to study and understand Hindu ideas and the layers of its development in history. Those who used this approach tended to concentrate on the study of Hindu scriptures and their expositions. Some of the early Christian missionaries did pioneering studies of Hinduism, which are gratefully acknowledged by Hindu

scholars themselves. All these works are not equally "objective." Most of them highlighted only the classical traditions of Hinduism. For some of them, Hinduism is Vedanta and Vedanta means only Advaita Vedanta. Many in the West were influenced by this very limited view of Hinduism. Recent studies, however, have begun to expose different strands of Hinduism ranging from Vedic ritual to popular cults in remote corners of India. The multifarious beliefs and practices of religious Hindus, especially the so-called "popular" Hinduism, has been receiving a good deal of attention from Christian scholars in recent years.

- (3) *The cultural approach*: This approach has taken several forms. While the fundamentalist missionaries failed to notice the positive aspects of Indian culture, which is as composite as Hinduism itself, others were fascinated by the family systems, community base and devotional fervor. Yet all of them saw the cruelty of such practices as widow-burning, child marriage, untouchability, the dowry system, etc. It is true that together with Western education and British colonialism, Christian missions played a major role in effecting reformation and renaissance within Hinduism. It is also true that Christ was acknowledged in various ways during the Indian renaissance. While all this must be acknowledged, what is not yet fully realized is the impact Hinduism had on Christianity. A careful study of Indian Christianity would demonstrate the conceptual, terminological and practical impact of Hinduism on Christianity in India. This impact extends from adopting Hindu social practices (such as dowry, auspicious and inauspicious time, caste system) to the use of Hindu terminology to

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name God, Jesus, places of worship and ministers. During the 20th century, Christians have consciously engaged in a process of inculturation. Consequently there are Indian forms of worship, Indian architecture, ashrams and an Indian Christian theology based on Hindu philosophical frameworks of understanding. In recent years awareness has increased that most efforts at inculturation made use only of the classical-brahminic traditions, and not of the popular traditions, which are those of the majority of Hindus.

- (4) *20th-century theological approaches:* A very influential theological approach to Hinduism is that of a fulfillment model. Christianity has been regarded as "the crown of Hinduism." Based on the evolutionary view of religion and with reference to Jesus' statement "not to destroy but to fulfill," this approach seeks to show Christ and Christianity as the fulfillment of Hinduism. The Hindu family system and some ethical values are seen as pointing to this fulfillment. Another variation of this approach is the idea of "the unknown Christ of Hinduism," which sees Christ's hidden presence in Hinduism. These theological approaches continue to receive theologians' attention, as they contribute to what is known as the "inclusive" model of a Christian theology of religions. But these approaches have been critiqued by Christians as well as by Hindus. How can Jesus fulfill what is not in Hinduism? If Christ is present in Hinduism, how do we account for experiences and perceptions that appear to contradict the Christian gospel? Such questions have been asked by Christian thinkers. The Hindu thinkers on the other hand, particularly the Advaita Vedantins, see the Supreme

Brahman as the fundamental reality underlying all religious experiences and the experience of oneness with this reality as their crown.

Today, there are some promising attempts by Indian Christian theologians to explore liberative dimensions of Hindu religious traditions in solidarity with the oppressed Dalit communities. On the other hand, there are also Dalit and tribal theologies which have emerged out of the "Dalit and tribal experience" of oppression which self-consciously reject dialogue with certain forms of Hinduism (brahmanical/high-caste) which have been the source of social oppression and denial of human dignity to Dalit and tribal people. Instead these attempts keenly examine the tribal, popular and Dalit religions for clues in the common struggle against social and economic oppression.

THE CURRENT STATE OF HINDU-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

From what has been described so far it should be clear that Hindus and Christians have engaged in mutual interaction and dialogue for several centuries. Christians have approached Hinduism in a variety of ways, depending upon their theological presuppositions.. This dialogue has been primarily between high-caste Hindus and Western Christians or high-caste Christians. In the 1930s, Hindu dialogues took place in small Christian ashrams, especially in Rishikesh. But these developments were not sustained. In the 1960s, the programs of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society provided a renewed focus on Hindu-Christian dialogue. Around the same time, in the wake of Vatican II, several Roman Catholic scholars who were involved in issues of inculturation also initiated "external"

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dialogues as a corollary to what was termed "internal" dialogue—by which they meant a Christian understanding of Hindu spirituality and participation in Hindu spirituality as Christians.

The establishment of the Program for Interreligious Dialogue in the 1970s by the World Council of Churches (WCC) was in part influenced by individuals engaged in Hindu-Christian dialogues. They provided the leadership for the dialogues sponsored by the WCC as well as by the Vatican. Since the 1980s, interest in Hindu-Christian dialogues has diminished for various reasons in India, although that interest has blossomed elsewhere, especially in North America and Europe.

In recent years, Hindu-Christian dialogues have been taking place on a small scale, primarily at Christian ashrams and theological institutions belonging to the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. The Catholic Bishops' Conference in India has a program unit on interreligious dialogue whereas nothing comparable exists in the National Council of Churches with regard to the Protestant and Syrian Orthodox traditions. Theological colleges or seminaries continue to espouse an interest in Hindu-Christian dialogue, some more than others. In addition, there are a number of dialogue centers which engage in periodic dialogues all over India.

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS AND OBSTACLES TO HINDU-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

In the preceding section, we have noted some formal initiatives on the part of Christians to engage in dialogue with Hindus. Ostensibly, a great deal of Hindu-Christian dialogue

takes place at an informal level, the level of daily life, as both communities live side by side in villages and towns. But today there are certain barriers, fears and hesitations that are in the way of an authentic dialogue.

- a) Christians in India hesitate to engage in dialogue with majority Hindus because of a minority consciousness. In regions where the Christian presence is demographically significant there seems to be greater openness for dialogue. But suffering from a minority syndrome leads to an instinct for self-preservation. As a result, Christians tend to be overly conscious of their rights and ignore issues affecting the nation as a whole. In recent years, Christians marched against state and central governments and even joined hands with other minority religious communities when their rights were threatened, but took a somewhat apathetic stance in times of Hindu-Muslim conflicts. The instinct for self-preservation can promote a reserved attitude towards open dialogue with Hindus.
- b) The dialogue between Hindus and Christians has also been affected by the current revival of political forms of Hinduism. Hindu attempts to "reconvert" (*shuddhi*) Christian tribals to Hinduism, threats to ban religious conversion in some Indian states, prohibition for Western missionaries to work, withdrawal of certain rights enjoyed by institutions run by minority communities, and attempts to revise "Christian personal laws"¹ are some factors that have created a great deal of suspicion in the minds of Christians, thus inhibiting dialogue. It is also becoming evident that in census reports some Christians have deliberately begun to register themselves as Hindus as a way to shield against

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potential persecution or to ensure economic benefits from the Government, reserved for backward communities. What this phenomenon implies for Hindu-Christian relations is not clear at the present time.

- c) From the Hindu standpoint the Christian image in India is still associated with colonialism. The Christian churches continue to maintain relationships with Western churches not only for historical reasons but also because of the ecumenical nature of the church. Hindus view such relations suspiciously. They are critical of the financial dependence of the Indian churches on Western churches and fear the continued influence of a crusading mission sponsored by the West. The growth of sectarian/fundamentalist Christianity with a crusading spirit and a negative view of Hinduism has served to strengthen Hindu suspicions of Christian loyalty and commitment to Indian culture and nation.
- d) The alienation of Christians from Hindu culture is also a factor that has undermined Christian engagement with Hinduism, for a majority of Indian Christians come from Dalit and tribal backgrounds without roots in Hindu traditions. The interest in Hindu-Christian dialogue, with few exceptions, has come from Western missionaries and high-caste converts to Christianity. The majority of converts to Christianity came from oppressed and depressed communities, trying to escape from the rigid social structure imposed by Hindu society. For such Christians it is difficult to engage in a conversation with their former oppressors, whereas high-caste Hindus disdain these Christians as impure persons. Furthermore, it is difficult for converts to

Christianity to engage in dialogue with a religion they eschewed.

- e) At present, Hindus seem to have little interest in dialogue, all the more so as there is also a general lack of interest in Christianity, although millions of Hindus regard Jesus as a great teacher and even consider him an *avatar*. It is a characteristic of Hinduism to absorb or embrace alien elements. Hindus are much more open to the teachings of Jesus Christ but hardly interested in institutionalized Christianity. The Christian institutions (schools, colleges and hospitals) no longer exert the same influence in Indian society as they once did, thus further diminishing Hindu interest in Christianity.
- f) Concern for dialogue with Hindus has not been central in the life of the Christian churches and congregations in India. The prevailing theology in most congregations is one of monologue. Established churches therefore have paid little attention to promoting Hindu-Christian dialogue in any formal way and Indian Christians, with a few exceptions, do not seem committed to pursue such a dialogue.

In this study it is important to note these obstacles if we are committed to explore Hindu-Christian relations today. Despite the apparent lack of interest on the part of Christians as well as Hindus, it is important for both communities to seek to understand one another in the interest of communal harmony. The future of Hindu-Christian dialogue is dependent on efforts at better understanding at community level without which meaningful theological dialogue may not be possible. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to identify some

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crucial theological issues that require further explorations between Hindus and Christians.

ISSUES IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS IN RELATION TO HINDUISM

Our study has sought to identify some crucial theological issues dividing Christians and Hindus, which require careful reflection in any Christian attempt to formulate a responsible theology of religions in relation to Hinduism. It is a matter of theological debate how to evaluate other religious traditions: is it possible to make significant evaluations of other religions and on what basis should such an evaluation be made? Should that basis be the Christian faith, or some other apprehension of truth common to all rational beings, or a mystical insight transcending Christian faith? In any case there is the further question of whether and how the specific character of other religions should affect the way in which they are assessed by Christian theologians. Much Christian theology of religion seems largely *a priori*. Both, very conservative or very radical positions can be developed with little attention to the precise details of other ways of thinking and living. It is necessary to recognize that the grounds for evaluating other traditions must come from distinctively Christian sources. However, a responsible theology of religion must approach other religious traditions with sensitivity and understanding. Scornful rejection and friendly embrace can be made with one's eyes shut, or, as is most frequently the case, with preconceived notions little affected by careful study. When we seek to be specific and nuanced, we are likely

to recognize both similarities and differences, but how these are going to be weighted in importance is much influenced by our prior theological conclusions. We may treat similarities as superficial or profound, and we may take empirical differences either as validation of irreconcilable divisions as determined theologically or as a challenge to the comprehensiveness of contemporary Christians' grasp of truth.

The topics that follow attempt to take into account similarities and differences. The listing presupposes that there are sufficient similarities to make it possible to find a linguistic equivalent or at least some partial overlap between a Hindu and a Christian term. In some cases it is unclear whether there is any significant equivalence, and certainly there is considerable difference as to how the most important topics are to be named and translated. In any case, the topics that we have identified require more thought and dialogue in Hindu-Christian relationships.

HINDU AND CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGIES

Many Christians have approached the Hindu traditions assuming that there is one correct Christian doctrine of human nature and that Hindus are similarly agreed concerning a characteristic Hindu anthropology. Closer scrutiny and reflection make clear that both assumptions must be modified. There are some conceptions common to Christians and to Hindus, there are also considerable differences, and our present situation in dialogue gives us no warrant to point to some particular view as normative for all Christians or for all Hindus. In general, both Christians and Hindus have recognized the presence of a human soul

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distinct from but connected with a human body. Often they have also recognized a third element, "spirit," which may be identical with, closely related to, or expressive of an indwelling Divine presence.

Debate between Protestants and modern Vedantins gives the impression of a sharp distinction: Christians viewing human beings as creatures who are physically defined persons fundamentally distinct from their Divine Creator and further separated from God by their living in original sin, contrasted with Hindus viewing human beings as uncreated souls similar to or identical with absolute Divine reality (Brahman). In this contrast Christians are thought to view human beings as sinful creatures, while Hindus are said to consider human beings as neither "creatures" nor "sinful." This sharp contrast must be considerably nuanced by other doctrines held by many Christians and many Hindus. These are the Christian doctrines of human creation in the image of God and through the Divine Logos and recreation through the Logos made human and the Holy Spirit. We should also note a frequent Hindu emphasis on the importance of the physical embodiment of the human soul, both in the negative sense of human bondage to sin (*papam*) and in the positive sense of the availability of Divine grace through physical objects that can be seen, touched, and tasted.

There is, to be sure, some basis for the assumption of many apologists in both traditions that Christians divide the Divine and human and that Hindus separate the soul and matter. There are, however, important qualifications, differing from one Hindu group to another. The assumption that Hindus have a more optimistic view than Christians of the human predicament needs even sharper qualification. There is a Hindu belief in the eventual liberation of all souls, but there

is also a Hindu belief in endlessly repeating cycles of history within which most souls must continue indefinitely in a state of sin and bondage. Many of the complexities of the Hindu belief are related to the theory of *karma* (see below). Even those Hindus who stress the Divine nature of the human soul have an understanding of human beings in social relationship that acknowledges and sometimes emphasizes the creaturely limitations of human life. Conversely, the Christian distinction between Creator and human creature goes together with the Christian affirmation of God's covenant with human beings whose "hearts are restless till they find their rest in God" (Augustin). In dialogue between particular Hindus and particular Christians these very general similarities and contrasts need to be specified in a situation in which there is not only a quest for mutual understanding but a recognition of common membership in human society.

NATURE OF INCARNATION OR AVATARA

The Hindu notion of *avatara* or Divine "descent" has important similarities to the Christian idea of God's incarnation in the man Jesus of Nazareth. There are also important differences; both, similarities and differences, need to be taken seriously by Christian interpreters. The similarities have been recognized by many uninterested in scholarly comparison. Some modern Hindus understand Christ as another *avatar* of Vishnu, and some Indian Christian notions of God's incarnation in Christ have been affected by Hindu views of the nature of the *avatar*. Here are some of the major differences:

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1. The number of Divine embodiments
2. The nature of the body
3. Defeat or victory for the *avatar*; the significance of sacrifice
4. The meaning of saving the world
5. The *avatar's* presence with and absence from his followers
6. Whether the *avatar* will return to earth
7. The *avatar's* relation to the process of creation
8. Whether the *avatar* is recognized as God

The most important similarity may be the common emphasis on Divine condescension, while the most important difference in emphasis in the Christian doctrine is the stress on humble condescension and humiliation, and thus the centrality of Christ's sacrifice.

A careful examination of these various facets is important for deepening our understanding, but we cannot simply work through the lists of similarities and differences to arrive at a theological evaluation. Theological judgments need to be as concrete as possible, and we would do well to look over the shoulders of those who have made such decisions in the past. These decisions relate not only to the use of the word *avatara* and its partial synonym, but also to the ways Christians have utilized Hindu notions of temporary or permanent Divine embodiment in their worship. The choices have sometimes been negative, especially when a concern to avoid idolatry has led to a sharp distinction between God's presence in Christ and God's presence in sacred objects or inspired persons. Christians in India have also been aware of the rejections of the *avatara* concept in the wider religious environment, whether by Muslims, Nirguna Sants, or Shaivas. Rather than running down a checklist, past theological

evaluations were more like a gradual learning process taking place in a translation project.

When we turn to our own theological task we cannot repeat what has been done before. We ought to be helped by the development of a worldwide history of religions, but the theological component needs to remain as close as possible to the situation of the churches in particular cultural religious settings. We ought not to be limited, however, to what the concept of *avatar* means to a particular group of Hindus with whom we are in dialogue. What we “borrow” may not accord with their understanding, just as their Hindu interpretation of Christ may be far from any Christian orthodoxy. There is certainly some tension between accurate understanding and creative theological interpretation. If the two completely part company, the effort at theological translation is frustrated, but the positive and negative choices from among the vast resources of the Hindu tradition are intended, not primarily as an effort to find word-for-word equivalents in a literal translation, but rather as an effort to express and embody Christian truth in a Hindu cultural environment. We should therefore expect considerable variety in such utilization of—or refusal to use—the concept of *avatar* to express God’s taking human form and substance in Jesus.

If Christians want to express their faith to an Advaitin audience, the notion of Jesus as an *avatar* will convey the same message as any other metaphor suggesting finite embodiment of the Divine; a visible point of light that later disappears when there is the full illumination of the True Light. In the *bhakti* context, on the other hand, Jesus as an *avatar* suggests a real embodiment of the Divine in a concrete form, but usually that body is only apparently human, consisting in a

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truth of special "pure matter" (*sattva*). In some *bhakti* theologies, moreover, there are various differentiations among *avatars*: full or partial, primary or secondary, etc. More popular Hindu notions of *avatara* do not make such precise distinctions. The Hindu figures that are truly human and in some paradoxical fashion also Divine are venerated as the Guru or True Guru. For some Hindus this is what it means to say that Jesus is an *avatar*, but the escalation of praise in describing religious leaders has reached the point where *avatar* is too low a title: the human Guru is actually true Godhead (*svarupa*). In any case the Christian affirmation concerning Jesus has to deal with the question of alternative claimants to the status of complete *avatar* or true Guru, and encounters in the Hindu context both the apparent generosity of accepting all claimants and the very particular and exclusive claims of sectarian Hindus.

This topic raises a question central for our discussion: how are the Christian claims of uniqueness concerning the ontological status and saving efficacy of Jesus to be related to diverse Hindu claims? These include both those that have a similar doctrine of grace but are committed to a different Lord and those that claim a breakthrough to a higher realm beyond competing Lords but also beyond even the most "amazing grace."

THE NATURE OF HINDU SPIRITUALITY —*BHAKTI*

Bhakti is often translated as "devotion". It comes from the root that also means "share in" or "belong to." It conveys a strong sense of participation or even mutual indwelling between the devotees and God. It may also be translated as "love" or an intense emotional attachment to God. *Bhakti*

is sometimes used in a broad sense, devoting an attitude of reverence towards any deity or human teacher. The Hindu "path of devotion" (*bhakti marga*), however, is understood as a path leading toward liberation (*moksha*) from our material embodiment in our present imperfect world through attaining abiding communion with a personally conceived ultimate reality. In its strictest sense, this path is one of exclusive devotion to some form or expression of ultimate reality, and its goal is not this-worldly benefits but supreme blessedness.

The *bhakti* tradition within Hinduism has considerably influenced the Christian practice of piety in India. A good deal of Indian Christian vocabulary is drawn from *bhakti* traditions. Some Indian Christian theologians have attempted to interpret Christianity as a *bhakti marga*, and have used *bhakti* to convey significant features of Christian faith and life. *Bhakti* can convey the importance of the human side of Divine-human love, the significance of participation in God, indeed of mutual indwelling. As Christians we certainly want to affirm *bhakti's* sense of loyalty to God that underlies all other loyalties. As Christians, we might well profit from a stronger acknowledgment of a variety of emotional moods and devotional stances within the community of devotees, and certainly within the world-wide church. We certainly do experience the dialectic of God's presence and absence, not only in personal religious experience but also in the affairs of the world. The sharing of devotional experiences through music and drama is something important for Indian Christians, as indeed for Christians in every part of the world. When we turn to the theological presuppositions of *bhakti* there is also much that Christian devotees would affirm: the reality of God's presence in the world and the

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mystery of the infinite Lord accommodating himself to capacities of very limited and often wayward servants. The central metaphysical paradox of *bhakti* poses a problem for Christian theologians as it does for Hindu theologians: is the God on whom everything depends also dependent on those who most recognize their dependence? That is a question Christians must continue to ponder.

Bhakti tradition also poses a harder question, for on closer scrutiny it is clear that there is no one single *bhakti* movement. Despite much mutual influence, *bhakti* to Shiva and *bhakti* to Vishnu remain quite distinct circles, each maintaining that higher devotion requires service to the supreme Lord, and to none other. This point of view may seem analogous to traditional Christian views of the nature of monotheistic allegiance—and therefore not liberal enough for contemporary Christian pluralists. There is another common feature of *bhakti* theologies, however, that is difficult for orthodox Christians to accept: all other deities have real power, which they exercise as servants of the Supreme Lord, each in the sphere of power apportioned to his or her domain. This may be a position that it is impossible for Christians to adopt, even if they specify that it is the Blessed Trinity who stands at the center of the circle of divine powers. This *bhakti* position is not that of Hindu polytheists, who believe that local powers operate independently. Nor is it the position of Advaita Vedanta, in either its classical or its modern forms, despite its apparent acceptance of the reality of the cosmos, for in the moment of true insight all these divine powers vanish in their distinctive manyness; there is only the Nameless One.

The very fact that Hindu *bhakti* theologians have dealt for centuries with a cultural world including many diverse

religious loyalties is a reason for Christian theologians to enter into serious dialogue with the intellectual and spiritual leaders of the *bhakti* tradition. Such dialogue is difficult but potentially rewarding for Christians both in India and beyond.

KARMA AND DIVINE GRACE

The belief in *karma* (action) and *samsara* (transmigration of soul) is common to all Indian religious traditions except the materialist school (Lokayata). In its early Vedic meaning *karma* meant precisely performed ritual action but in later Hindu understandings the concept evolved into ethical action and comes to be associated with the belief in *samsara*. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, affirms the power of the ritual action in the Vedic sense but at the same time emphasizes the importance of a right attitude in performing one's duty. One performs right actions as a matter of duty without worrying about its consequences for the soul. But, on the other hand, The *Bhagavad Gita* also highlights the centrality of devotion to God (as Krishna). The devotee can have an intense devotional attachment to God to the extent of renouncing all duties and take refuge in God. Such devotion can lead to liberation. It thus becomes evident that there is tension between karmic power (attained through ritual or ethical action) and Godly power (grace bestowed on the devotee) existing in certain strands of Hinduism, especially in *bhakti* traditions.

The relationship between divine grace and *karma* is an important issue in Hindu-Christian dialogue. While the *bhakti* traditions of Hinduism often affirm the unconditionality of divine grace in breaking the chain of

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karma and *samsara*, their philosophical systems also presume a certain degree of preparedness of the soul through adherence to the law of *karma*. This problem is somewhat analogous to the tension between God's grace and obedience to the law in Christian understanding. The influence of *bhakti* traditions on Indian Christians in general and the frequent use of Hindu *bhakti* theology as a framework for articulating an Indian Christian theology in particular makes the tension between divine grace and obedience to law a crucial issue for Hindu-Christian dialogue.

SAKTI (DIVINE FEMINE POWER)

One of the most popular form of Hindu worship is goddess-worship. It takes many forms. The regular worship of family and clan deities in home shrines, the occasional rituals involving the local powers in each village, which provide healing and counsel, as well as ward off communal disaster, the worship of consorts of Hindu gods in temples and homes, and the worship of a single goddess as the great Mother and embodiment of all divine power active in the world. Christian reflection on the significance of goddess-worship, however, is still infrequent and dialogue with Hindus in the goddess tradition (*Sakta*) occurs still less. This is because the goddess has generally been subordinated to her husband in Hindu theologies and criticized by Christian interpreters as a primary expression of Hindu polytheism or idol worship.

Several factors have contributed to a new situation in which Christian dialogue with the Hindu goddess tradition needs to be initiated. First, this is the type of Hindu religion that has been central in the Hindu heritage of a majority of

Indian Christians. Second, the spirit possession characteristic of much goddess-worship has some similarities to the Christian Pentecostals' "speaking in tongues" and other signs of the invasion of the worshiper's body by the Holy Spirit. Third, recent Christian exploration of the significance of the feminine language and metaphors for describing the divine may find the goddess tradition insightful both positively and negatively. Hindu traditions do recognize the distinctive role of women as being responsible for their families' health and wealth, but they are also concerned with the exercise of women's power when unchecked by male control. Whether such attitudes correspond to the esteem accorded to goddesses would require further exploration and discussion.

The concept of *Sakti* and its relation to the goddess tradition may also serve as a topic for Hindu-Christian dialogue with specific reference to women's concerns in contemporary society. The role of women in both Hindu and Christian traditions must be addressed and the participation of women in actual dialogues encouraged.

SCRIPTURE

Christian encounter with Hindus or the Hindu tradition cannot avoid the issue of scripture. Hindu tradition considers its scriptures as the first and foremost authority for religious beliefs—*pramanas*. The tradition classifies these scriptures into *sruti* (that which is seen or heard) and *smṛti* (that which is remembered), the former being the primary "revealed" or "inspired" texts (Vedas and Vedānta) and the latter (epics, *puranas* and *tantras*) having a subordinate role of expounding the primary texts. Over the centuries, the Hindu

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scholars debated about the nature of authority and the authorship of these sacred texts and devised sophisticated hermeneutical tools and methods of interpretation. In general terms, the Hindu interpreters saw the finality of scripture not in the texts in and of themselves but rather as a means to "see" or experience (*anubhava*) the supreme reality. Thus in *bhakti* tradition the authority of the Veda is recognized to the extent that it concurs with the religious experience of Shiva and Vishnu and the witnesses of their own regional scriptures. On the other hand, some modern Hindu thinkers have looked upon the Hindu scriptures as the repository of all knowledge and as legitimate guides to religious living.

The sheer weight and influence of Hindu scriptures in shaping the Hindu view of life and the accompanying hermeneutical tradition invariably raise questions for Christians. There are Christians who regard the Hindu scriptures as some sort of demonic products. Such attitudes are not promoting mutual engagement, but contribute to religious conflicts. Christians must realize that a great deal of the Christian vocabulary used in their theology and in vernacular translations of the Bible are derived from Hindu scriptures and tradition. For this reason alone it is important that Christians take the Hindu scriptures seriously.

Besides drawing concepts, idioms and vocabulary from Hindu scriptures in translating the Christian scriptures, Christians are also challenged to explore the relationship between the Bible and Hindu sacred texts. Though this relationship is not quite analogous to the one of the New Testament to the Hebrew scriptures, Hindu-Christian dialogue still needs to address the issue of continuity and discontinuity. Some Christian thinkers in India have viewed the Hindu sacred texts as a form of *preparatio evangelii* and

thus are seeing the Christian scriptures as the “true Vedas” (*Satya Veda*) and unquestionable *sruti*, either fulfilling or supplanting the Hindu *sruti*. Others have proffered the suggestion of replacing the Old Testament with selections from Vedic scriptures. Still other thinkers have seen the Hindu texts as supplementing the Christian scriptures with new insights or understandings and thus have suggested an assimilative approach.

These divergent views are all attempts to come to terms with Hindu sacred texts. Hindu thinkers too have struggled to relate their scriptures to the Bible and have estimated its value in divergent ways. It is clear that both Hindu and Christian traditions take an uncompromising stance in assigning to their respective scriptures the supreme authority in matters of faith. Thus in Hindu-Christian encounters neither rejecting the scriptures of the other nor subordinating them to one's own solves the problem of conflicting claims to authority. Similarly, it is impossible to “Hinduize” the Christian scriptures or to “Christianize” the Hindu scriptures without violating their integrity. We should recognize that the scriptures of a religious tradition have to be understood in dynamic relatedness to the community that endows them with meaning and authority. Hindus and Christians in dialogue may profit most by mutual appreciation of one another's scriptures and thereby may deepen their respective self-understanding.

Christian encounter with Hindus at the popular level cannot assume that all Hindus have the knowledge of the Vedas or have read them. Not all Hindu communities possess a written scriptural tradition, as many depend upon certain oral traditions as authoritative. Christians therefore cannot approach Hindus with the Bible in their hands and enter into

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a scriptural dialogue. Furthermore, the vast corpus of sacred texts in Hindu tradition also poses difficulties in entering into fruitful dialogue. In their engagement, it is important that Christians be aware of the authority of the different texts for different Hindu traditions.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

It has often been claimed that the Hindu tradition is more concerned with *moksha* (liberation or salvation) as the supreme goal of life than with day-to-day morality. This impression is strengthened by the fact that some modern Hindu apologetics tend to emphasize the philosophical or Upanishadic side of Hinduism at the expense of the more mundane and this-worldly side found in the Hindu epics. If the Vedas served as the infallible source of wisdom, they had in the course of their history come to be identified with the caste system and thus with legitimating social inequality. The lower castes having no access to the Vedas had to depend upon the devotional religion developed in the *smṛti* literature which carried the message of God's love for all, irrespective of caste differences. The focus on *dharma* in its social dimension therefore appears stronger in the Hindu epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and in the vernacular *bhakti* literature.

It is in the modern period that the Hindu tradition has become more interested in dealing with the social dimensions of *dharma*, and thus issues of social inequality based on religion were critically examined. This interest in part is a Hindu response to Christian missionary activity. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi focused attention on reforming and reordering Hindu society. In recent decades, the revolt of

the Dalit and tribal communities against brahminical domination, the revival of historical movements (such as the neo-Buddhist), the impact of modern science and communication, the enactment of laws prohibiting practices such as untouchability, and the greater participation of the hitherto marginalized communities in the political processes of India have all contributed to a reinterpretation of the Hindu traditions in the direction of social justice and transformation. The current Hindu revival movements in India have increasingly focused attention on social transformation through the establishment of Hindu "mission" schools, colleges, hospitals, charitable institutions, etc.

Hindu-Christian encounter and dialogue have tended to focus attention primarily on the lofty ideals of the Upanishadic thought and until recently paid little attention to local or indigenous groups and traditions. In the present context of the struggle for justice and equality by large sections of marginalized people in India, Hindu-Christian dialogue cannot remain at the level of academic or doctrinal discussions only. A mutual appreciation of the doctrinal excellence or the depth of piety must be accompanied by an examination of both the oppressive and liberative dimensions within Christianity and Hinduism. How Hindus and Christians can work together for human liberation and social transformation is an issue that must be addressed seriously in dialogue. In dealing with the general issue of social transformation Hindu-Christian dialogue cannot ignore the dimensions of power that is exhibited by religious communities in subjugating others. Thus the future focus of Hindu-Christian dialogue must include common concerns of actual living and explore the appropriate religious symbols

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that serve to promote total human liberation and overcome social degradation.

ULTIMATE GOALS OF LIFE

An important part of modern Hindu apologetics is the claim that all religions are different paths to the same ultimate goal, just as there are different ways to reach a hill top. But the way the ultimate goal is described in different Hindu traditions suggests different visions and experiences available within Hinduism.

According to the Vedic religion, after death human beings go to heaven (*svarga*) and the measure of enjoyment and length of stay there depend on the kinds and number of ritual sacrifices performed on earth by the person concerned. But when the idea of re-birth and re-death was introduced into this religion, the ultimate goal perceived by most traditions is liberation from the bondage of the chain of births.

The meaning and importance of liberated life in the ultimate sense differs from tradition to tradition. The Jaina view of pure consciousness and the Buddhist idea of *nirvana* are said to be ineffable. So also the Advaita view of oneness with the Supreme Reality. The devotional traditions talk about an inseparable union with God, although the souls do not lose their identity. The way some poet-saints describe this life in heaven—bowing at the feet of God, enjoying the fellowship of other devotees, singing and garlanding, etc.—presupposes a kind of glorious body taken by the liberated soul.

As regards the relationship between mundane life and ultimate goal, Hindu traditions offer an integrative picture

of four goals of life, namely, wealth (*artha*), desire (*kama*), righteousness (*dharmā*) and liberated freedom (*moksha*), although there are different opinions about their sequence and order. In any case this four-fold schema does cover all people irrespective of gender, caste and economic position. Christian scholars have observed that the belief in the chain of births has led Hindus to take a pessimistic view of life in the world and to be passive with regard to historical events. But Hindu scholars have countered such views by arguing that their faith is world-affirming and that it has a holistic view of life. The neo-Vedantins and modern thinkers have interpreted the Hindu view of life as integral, combining body and soul, well-being of the present world with the ultimate goal of life. The social service undertaken by Hindu revivalists could be taken as a practical demonstration of this integrated view of life.

The ultimate goal of life in relation to mundane life is an important issue in Hindu-Christian dialogue. The ultimate goal of life can be understood purely in individualistic terms without any communal relevance. While fundamentalist Christianity has a tendency to focus exclusively on attaining individual salvation, Christianity on the whole has not ignored the social dimensions of individual salvation. Hinduism, on the other hand, has given a higher priority to individual experience of *moksha*; how this experience relates to the community and institutional life is seldom articulated explicitly. Modern interpreters of Hinduism have been aware of this issue as a result of Christian encounter with Hinduism. But this question needs to be pursued further in the context of Hindu-Christian dialogue.

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CONCLUSION

In our study, the word "dialogue" is understood as a narrower category than "encounter," but as broader than the formal conversations between members of two religious communities. Dialogue is motivated by a desire for a better understanding of the other tradition. Because of the great variety among both Christians and Hindus, the exact nature of dialogue may vary greatly from one situation to another. In this study we have attempted to provide a historical and contemporary overview of Hindu-Christian relations. While we have noted some formal initiatives for dialogue with Hindus, a great deal of Hindu-Christian dialogue takes place at the level of daily life and is never named or understood as such. But there are situations when informal dialogues may be difficult and we should not presume that all Hindus will be interested in learning more about Christianity or even in explaining to Christians more about their religion. Our study in the context of the Indian sub-continent has also noted current barriers for a healthy dialogue between the two communities. There is an urgent need today to address such obstacles in the Indian context and it is our hope that this document serves that purpose.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) The working group on Hinduism is grateful to the Lutheran World Federation for initiating the study on "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths." The working group was able to meet twice during the past

four years (in Madras and Bangalore) focusing attention on Hindu-Christian relations, mostly on the Indian sub-continent. What we have been able to accomplish through this study is rather modest. We strongly feel that this study needs to be pursued further by the churches in India. We hope that this document will serve as a starting point for further explorations. We also recognize that given the spread of the Hindu diaspora dialogues between Hindus and Christians are taking place outside India. Future studies on this issue will need to pay more attention to this phenomenon.

- (2) This study has emphasized Christian encounter with classical or traditional forms of Hinduism that have been central to the lives of upper caste Hindus and that have in varying degrees also formed part of the religious life of Hindus of lower castes. The group was quite conscious of the kinds of critique that Dalit and tribal Christians would bring to such a study. We have noted at appropriate places the prevailing distrust between Dalit Christians and high-caste Hindu communities that has prevented meaningful dialogue. This deep distrust can be overcome, and a genuine understanding can best be promoted by further studies on rituals, beliefs—often articulated in song, story and dance—that have constituted much of the religion of Dalit and tribal communities.

Hindu-Christian dialogue needs to pay greater attention to the dimensions of culture that have shaped the beliefs and practices of the various religious communities in India. It would be inappropriate to identify Indian culture with the brahmanical tradition or with a set of shared beliefs or customs of particular Hindu

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communities. The contributions of Dalit and tribal Christians in this regard may help broaden the focus of Hindu-Christian dialogue in the future. We recommend that the Lutheran World Federation undertake studies that focus on the religion and culture of historically marginalized communities in the future.

- (3) While we commend this document to the churches in India and elsewhere, we would like to urge them to initiate actual dialogues with Hindus wherever possible. It is our conviction that dialogue is a crucial element in building up communities of religious harmony. To that end, we urge the recipients of this document to persuade their respective churches to establish departments of interreligious dialogue at national and regional levels.

* * *

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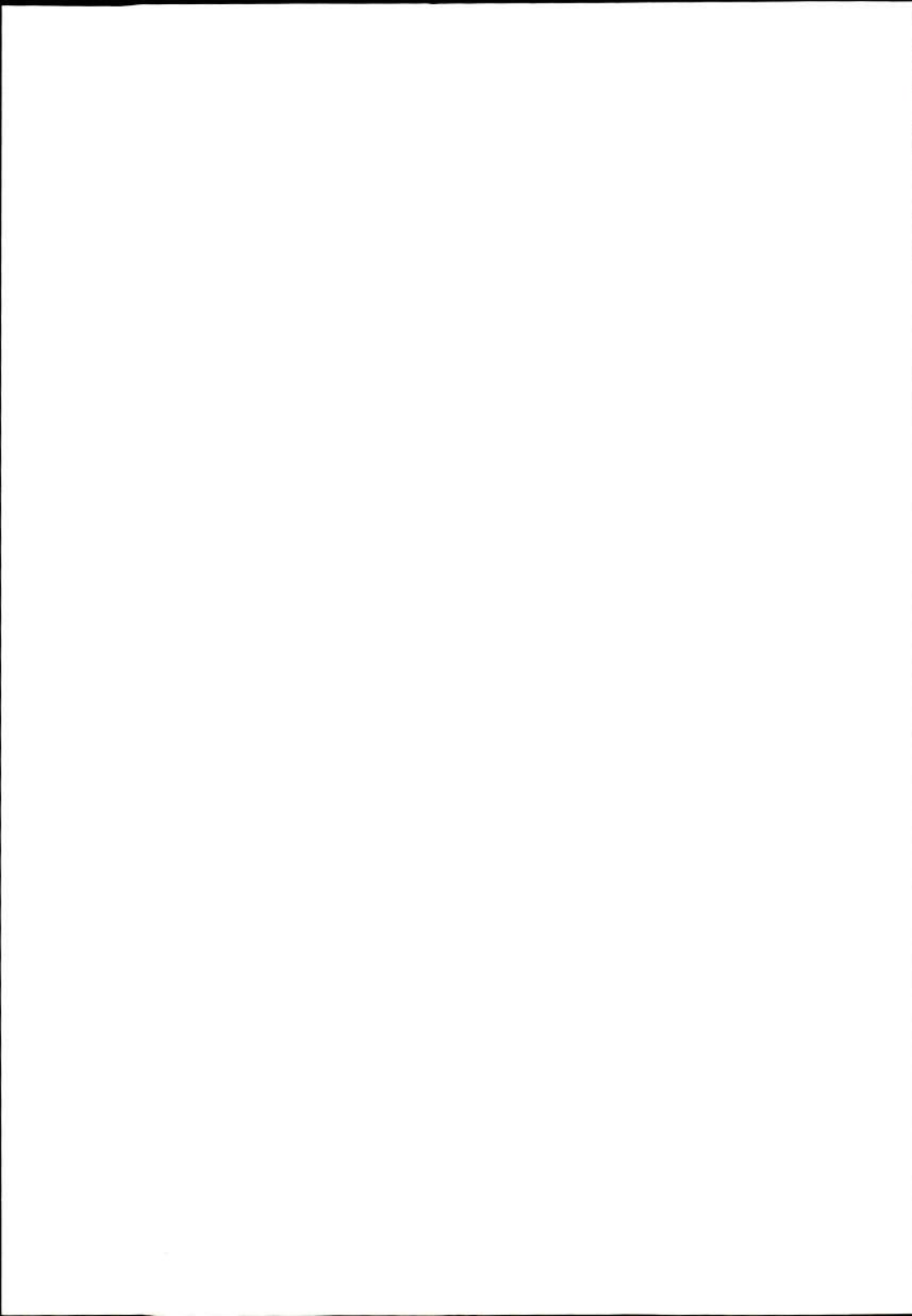
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NOTE

- ¹ In India religious communities are governed by different personal laws based on religious affiliation. There is no uniform civil code on matters pertaining to marriage, inheritance, divorce, etc. Each religious community has its own set of laws according to which law courts rule over its civil (not criminal) cases.



SUMMARY REPORT FROM THE WORKING GROUP ON ISLAM

INTRODUCTION

Islam is not mysterious. It is huge, aggressive, advancing, and arguably the dominant religious force of the coming period. But it is not mysterious, and in broad outline it is surely familiar to those involved in this study project. Therefore we have not provided a mini-introduction to Islam. The one caution is that Muslims are very diverse and hold many different points of view.

It is ironic that although Islam is the youngest of the major religious traditions—apart from Sikhism—it throws theology of religions back on the oldest themes that mark the Christian faith—the divinity of Jesus, the triune nature of God, the fact and meaning of the cross, and the trustworthiness and function of the Christian scriptures. These are issues central to the Christian faith. The existence of Islam means that a full Christian theology of religions is inescapably involved with its own foundations. In a sense, it saves Christianity from possible weariness with their own tradition, and diversion into mere theological trendiness.

Given this reality, it might be expected that the Islam group would have concentrated on comparative study of these great themes. Surprisingly, perhaps even to ourselves, we did

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not do that. Rather, we chose to concentrate on the task of identifying the context from which a living theology of religions could emerge, and the method for its emergence. The main point, a deceptively simple one, that came from our group, is that a Christian theology of religions related to Muslims must be a relational one. We were very interested in the question of what that meant.

By adopting this approach, we did not intend to imply that the personhood of Jesus, the nature of God, the meaning of the cross, the integrity of the scriptures, the way of salvation, and other classical themes that lie between Christianity and Islam do not have to be discussed. They must be discussed, and we have made a long list of such issues (cf. Appendix).

Moreover, we sense a need for a new approach. On the Christian side there is some weariness, at intellectual levels, with the traditional process. Many strong and creative theological statements have been made in the engagement with Muslims. They have almost always been initiated by Christians. They have had a somewhat modest impact, and in fact, they are increasingly viewed with displeasure and suspicion by Muslims. On the Muslim side—Muslims are by nature praxis-oriented—they have never been overly interested in theology as a subject, and they are certainly not today. They consider the old issues which Christians want to discuss as already decided.

The effect of all this is a growing question as to the substance of future Christian-Muslim discussions, and the issue is aggravated by all manner of mutual irritations. This context must be recognized, and then must be transformed, not only for the sake of good theology of religions, but for the sake of the Christian witness itself.

It is for that reason that we have been so emphatic in saying that a living theology of religions having to do with Islam is doing us *two* favors. The first is that it reminds us that we must share our great truths, and share them more effectively. The second favor is that it reminds us that this cannot happen except by new forms of engagement at levels where communication is real and healthy.

It was this awareness and understanding of the members of the Islam group, as well as their individual competencies, that determined the direction of the two meetings we had together. At Sigtuna in Sweden, we identified some of the topics that Christians and Muslims can discuss together, and we established the paper that we would like to receive from each member. At St Paul in the USA, we dealt with the papers and concluded the report. To appreciate fully the intent of the message, it would be advantageous to have available and to read the papers which provided the insights presented in the message, and other valuable materials and observations that could not be integrated into a short statement.

The statement, as found below, also takes into consideration responses made to it at Bangkok in July 1996.

PREAMBLE

Christians are living in the context of the global village. There, on the one hand, members of the different religious traditions live in isolation from each other, governed by a ghetto mentality. But at the same time there are neighbors

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who live, work, celebrate and mourn together. In this situation the gospel is reminding us of the importance and power of this word:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message [word] of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us . . . (2 Cor. 5, 18–20; RSV).

In that spirit the Islam working group of the study project, "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths," presents this document which, in relation to study papers presented by members of the group, summarizes

- the historical, ecclesiastical background and context in which the churches have to redefine their relation with Muslims;
- the concern of the churches;
- theological dimensions of our engagement with Muslims;
- issues that need further exploration; and
- future steps and procedures, including recommendations for developing a practical theology of living together.

Many Christians live in multireligious societies. It is therefore imperative that they include this fact in their theological agenda. Especially in regard to Muslim neighbors, Christians do not only have a long history of encounter with a unique character. They share important aspects of their faiths based

on a common religious history, but there are also considerable divergences on some major theological issues. This awareness demands a profound reconsidering of relations between Christians and Muslims.

Many churches and Christians, however, consider their relationship with Muslims under negative aspects. Some fear the political power and goals which are linked with actual Islamic movements. Especially those Christians living as minorities in the midst of Muslim majorities have experiences of discrimination that tend to inhibit initiatives for dialogue. Others are afraid that a religious or theological encounter with people of another faith—Muslims—might weaken their own faith; and others are afraid of both. But “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18), nor is fear a good counselor. Therefore the churches need to be enabled to recognize that any approach to Muslims is based on the example of God’s activity in Christ, which was concerned with the wholeness of humanity and creation (John 3:16). The world which is still hostile must be the paradigm of any Christian encounter with Muslims. But God in Christ is reconciling the world to God. The churches, therefore, also need their attention drawn to the kenotic principle as expressed in the life of Christ Jesus who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7). This principle implies that God has allowed his own agenda to be dictated by a humanity which had turned away from God. That agenda, which is based on God’s outgoing love for all, led to what seemed to be a total failure when God’s Messiah was rejected. But in reality it proved to be the ultimate way to victory, as seen on the road to Emmaus when Jesus opened the eyes of the disciples to understand the new chapter in human history which arose from the ruins.

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Christ invites them, and us, to follow him. What appears in his life as defeat now leads to the beginning of our witness to the redemptive will of God. This will is directed toward all humankind. Therefore it needs to be communicated by the people of God who are sent to be witnesses to God's reconciling love:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9–10).

One way this happens is in dialogue, in a living and witnessing encounter with the neighbor. Since dialogue implies the witness to God's great deeds, it cannot and may not become a deceptive means of faith propaganda. The sense of responsibility implies that the neighbors in dialogue and their witness to the faith become an integral part of the engagement. In many instances the Bible gives testimony that God was working at places where the believers did not expect his presence. Therefore the Christian will eagerly and sincerely, and with an open mind, listen to what is being shared in order to detect the signs of God's work and presence in the other one. Martin Luther, whose dealing with Islam was mentioned frequently in the course of our meetings, wrote: "The natural light of reason is strong enough to regard God as good, gracious, merciful and generous; that is a strong light" (WA 56, 177). Perhaps the other's witness may lead the Christian to deeper insights of his or her own faith, further enriching the understanding of the boundless dynamics of God's grace and love.

Such dialogical encounter demands a sincere commitment to one's own faith as well as a sincere respect for the other's faith; it does not impose a theological judgment on the faith of Muslims. It encourages, however, a basic aspect of the faith, which time and again has been described in biblical narration, and witnessed to in the experience of the church, that theology and theological reflection is done "on the way," in conversation with God or other companions on this way. It creates not static dogmatic formulations but an open awareness of new steps which God had already prepared for the faithful. The unavoidable closeness of Christians and Muslims in our time may be such a new step prepared by God. And therefore, accepting the Muslims as participants on this way of doing theology may be the right response to God's activity in our time. In this engaging process we will trust in the continuing promise of Christ who said: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). In the Muslim tradition there is an impetus for believers to set aside theological disputes and meet on the common ground of ethics:

If God had willed, He would have made you one single community, but He wanted to test you. So vie one with another in good deeds. To God you will all return and He will decide wherein you differed (Qur'an, V:48).

OBJECTIVES

In our discussions about an appropriate approach to the task given to us, that is to reflect on "theological perspectives on

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Islam," it became clear to us that the objective will not be a "theology of Islam," or the like. It will not help to improve the relations between Christians and Muslims to compare dogmatic structures or expressions with each other, and come finally to some kind of theological judgement. Such an approach would consider both Christian theology and Islamic teaching as something merely static. This is an inappropriate approach, and one that is rejected by many believers in both communities.

The starting point is to improve relations between Christians and Muslims, and initial efforts should be geared to that task. Christians and Muslims are living together, and this fact implies that they share many problems which have to be overcome through common effort and action. This can be achieved only when both refrain from bearing false witness against each other, from spreading false rumors about the other, and from attempting to harm each other. This "living together" has not only practical implications, but it also needs to be based on a solid theological reflection that justifies such a mutual attitude in accordance with faith. Traditionally, such relations were shaped in the framework of mission. Without denying the cross associated with following Christ and proclaiming the gospel, it may be noted that this approach often led to mistrust and unnecessary confrontations. Thus it seems necessary to ask anew whether that understanding of mission which took the neighbor merely as a receiver of the Christian missionary call is appropriate.

Dialogue, living together, bears in itself the element of witness, as will be shown later. Therefore, the theological reflection about the meaning of living together will not focus on religious systems, but will look for a direct encounter

with human beings who are acknowledged as brothers and sisters, created and loved by the same God whom Christians confess. Therefore any attempt to establish living and working relations with other people is done in the open before God.

DECIPHERING THE SIGNS OF GOD: THE MEANING OF OUR PLURALIST CONTEXTS

Since the rise of Islam, as the Qur'ān attests, Muslims were concerned about their relations with Christians. Nevertheless, the fact that the call to Islam was pronounced by Muhammad six centuries after the coming of Christ in an area where Christianity was already known, and the fact that for fourteen centuries the histories of Islam and Christianity have been linked together in many ways, calls for careful consideration. This is all the more necessary when we remember that in the Christian faith the whole world is given to the government of God's Word who is Jesus Christ. Therefore everything that happens in this world has to be related to God's Word. This includes those events which take a critical attitude to Christianity. They too need to be reflected upon in a theological way. What does God want to tell Christians through these facts?

The relationship between Christians and Muslims is clearly a unique one. Both share a common religious heritage which begins with the understanding that humankind is intended to be God's representative and caretaker of creation. The common respect for Abraham which Christians and Muslims share with the Jewish people, is a strong motive for

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rediscovering their kinship as monotheistic traditions. Abraham's faith is relevant to both as an indicator of what faith means, the absolute trust in God's graciousness and faithfulness. The references to other prophets and to Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, are other pointers to this common religious heritage, although in their respective theological interpretations Christians and Muslims attribute to them differing meanings.

These theological divergences are rooted in the core of each religion and need to be considered with care and respect, accompanied with the will to understand. Analogies in the framework of theological thinking, e.g., God's initiative and his attitude to and relationship with human beings can contribute to a deeper respect of the other's faith. It can do more. These remarks show that for Christians who reflect on the divine truths and their influence on their life, the sharing of experiences and insights with Muslims can be of extreme personal importance to the understanding of God's compassion and action, sometimes under aspects which had not previously come to mind.

Since matters of faith are the contents of dialogue, it must be accepted that (mutual) witness is a basic factor in such communication. To argue that dialogue and witness are two opposing or even excluding conceptions does not only misunderstand but distorts completely what dialogue stands for. Talking about one's faith and sharing its treasures with someone else is not possible without the utmost sincerity and truthfulness. This further implies that dialogue cannot be used as a hidden means for secondary goals. Using dialogue as a tactical device would not only distort it, but would distort witness as well.

This attribute of dialogue, namely witness, takes seriously one's own faith and that of the companion in dialogue. Here the notion of absoluteness may be remembered. It is not a religious system that is absolute. "Absoluteness" is only meaningful as "absolute commitment." As such, in dialogue it tolerates also the "absolute commitment" of the other.

What is urgently needed in this context, and what has been touched upon and reflected in some of the submitted papers, is a Christian re-assessment of what "truth" means as it differs from philosophical conceptions of truth. The Christian notion of truth should include the moral implications to which the Bible testifies when it relates truth to the person of Jesus Christ, to the witness of the Spirit, and to the faithfulness of the believer. Against this background "theology" is understood as something "in the making," something which is dialogical, which needs engagement with someone who is also on the way, in order to understand God and his deeds. It is therefore a *theologia in via*, a theology on the way.

Sharing one's experiences and exchanging mutual concerns prevents theology from becoming something theoretical, which loses its spiritual dynamics and becomes irrelevant to the believers. By doing theology dialogically, by seeking for God's footprints in the common actual situation, theology hopefully regains its meaning as a guideline for the faithful. Dialogue, in order to be a healthy enterprise, must be rooted in mutual respect and equal commitment from both sides.

This understanding of theology is also based on the tradition of the Reformation, namely, that theology is a practical habitude (*theologia est habitus practicus*). It is therefore related to people whom the theologians meet, and with

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whom they communicate. This encounter prevents a theologian from making "objective" statements about the other's religion or faith as if the other were an object himself or herself. Such an endeavor would not conform with the meaning of theology in the above term. It could not practically help the church and lead it in its spiritual encounter with its surrounding religious world (*Umwelt*).

TOGETHER ON THE WAY: CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

Together on the way, Christians and Muslims talk and witness about their respective faiths. These conversations reflect their common situations which bring them to live together as neighbors.

Both firmly believe that God has given them the task to safeguard his creation. This means not only to take care that life on earth remains possible, but to develop conditions wherein life becomes pleasant. Although in certain aspects the understanding of Muslims and Christians may differ, they still need to reflect more seriously about their common ground and the common task of achieving shared goals.

The question may be raised why Christians and Muslims have a *common* task in creation. Would it not be better if both made separate attempts to fulfil the good according to the obligations which are demanded by their respective faiths? Yet, since both of them, together with other people, have to share the ground which God has prepared for them, and since the actions of one side will necessarily have its impact on the other side, there is also practically no other way than

carrying together for the common good in a common world. If it is the common understanding that God created this world in order that it should live, and that humankind is responsible that this aim remains alive, then the formulation of common aims becomes an imperative, in spite of differing motivations and conceptions which lead to the achievement of these common objectives.

A first step is to identify and to analyze the most important "common goods." As Christians and Muslims have both repeatedly stated, these include the need to safeguard the integrity and dignity of humankind itself. God created human beings equal to each other in dignity and responsibility. Therefore any act or situation created by human beings that reduce the dignity of any one of them must be acknowledged as an act of atrocity and ultimately an act against God, regardless of who the person(s) may be. Therefore the struggle for the acknowledgment and implementation of human rights, the fight against poverty and misery, the struggle for justice in the fields of economy, politics and social structures are at the top of the agenda. The Pancasila, the five pillars of the Indonesian constitution, highlight these principles. There are other concerns related to aspects of living together, as, e.g., the misuse of religion and religious sentiments for political purposes, or the guarantee of equal rights to all citizens in one state. Another important concern is in the area of ecology. Because they refer to basic areas in which men and women are to fulfil their tasks in being God's caretakers in creation, the ecological questions can no longer be neglected.

The area of education, too, needs careful attention. To prepare someone to take over his or her working position in God's property, and to plant an awareness of responsibility,

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is a primary goal of education. Finally, education for better interreligious understanding and respect, for peace and for all factors which strengthen it, are crucial in our time.

All these areas of human problems that we have mentioned are in urgent need of common consideration and solution. In fact, in many cases it is actually Christians and Muslims themselves who are depriving each other of their rights and dignity, and are preventing these goals from being achieved. Therefore, it is their credibility and faithfulness towards their creator whom they confess in their prayers which is at stake. Neither will be able to convince the other that their faith is serious and their piety is genuine as long as they pay primary attention to the correctness of dogmatic expressions, and obedience to rules and laws claimed to be of divine origin, but at the same time neglect the implementation of God's will for the well-being of creation, for the health of human society, and for positive living together.

The members of this group agree that the concrete topics and the practical areas of concern must be identified more comprehensively in the localities themselves. The local contexts can be very different, given the great variety of Christian and Muslim traditions in terms of theology, culture, expressions of piety, and jurisprudence. It is there that the agendas for relevant dialogue and action must be set up.

The thoughts of this document are based on the following study papers, in order of their presentation at our meeting in St. Paul, July 27–31, 1995:

Roland Miller, "Prolegomena for Theological Perspectives on Islam"

Willem Bijlefeld, "Theology of Religions: a Few Notes Occasioned by a Bibliography For 1990–1994"

- Sigvard v. Sicard, "Resources for Considering Issues in Christian Muslim Relations"
- Olaf Schumann, "Theological Issues in Christian-Muslim Dialogue"
- David Windibiziri, "Christian Muslim Relations in Northern Nigeria"
- Olaf Schumann, "The Righteous Society: Muslim and Christian Perspectives"
- Roland Miller, "The Indian Muslim Response to Religious Pluralism"
- Jan Henningsson, "Human Rights in the Light of Muslim and Christian Anthropology"
- Charles Amjad-Ali, "Religion and Politics: Contemporary Challenges to Dialogue and the Development of Theology in the Context of Islam"
- Sigvard v. Sicard, "The Role and Abuse of Religion in Situations of Conflict"
- Charles Amjad-Ali, "Political and Social Conditions: Challenge to Christian Faith, Praxis and Mission in the Context of Pakistan"
- Jan Henningsson, "Towards an Interreligious Understanding of *hikma*"

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) It is essential that the materials of the Islam working group be available at relevant levels, including the local churches. It is therefore recommended:
 - a. That this document, together with the study papers of the Islam group, be published as a separate volume by the LWF.

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- b. That copies of the volume be made available to concerned theologians in seminaries/divinity schools, and that theologians be asked to provide responses to the materials.
 - c. That the LWF, if possible, facilitate the preparation of study materials for adult classes in congregations, based on the study papers.
 - d. That together with the study materials of the project, a basic background information piece on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations be provided to facilitate understanding of the study materials.
- (2) The Islam group has touched only selected issues related to the development of dialogical theology in relation to Islam. There are many issues that need further exploration. Some of them may be more easily addressed by theological faculties, others by pastoral conferences and still others by lay groups at congregational levels. As set forth in this Statement, these issues are best addressed in conversation with Muslims. They include the following (cf. Appendix):
- I. From the Perspectives of Islamic Issues
 - II. From the Perspective of Christian Theology
 - III. From the Perspective of Immediate and Common Relevance

It is recommended:

- a. That the list of these topics be sent to all churches with the request that they be transmitted to appropriate levels.
- b. That every theological institution and study institute in Islam-related areas be requested to initiate/

- continue dialogue with Muslims on an appropriate topic.
- c. That the churches be challenged to prepare a program of dialogue through selected congregations on appropriate topics.
 - d. That provision for the sharing of findings be made.
- (3) The Islam group urges the continued development of appropriate means for dialogue and witness related to Muslims. It is therefore recommended that:
- a. Every church body be encouraged to establish an internal structure where the concern for Muslims is discussed and planned.
 - b. That every church body be asked to examine whether theological curricula adequately represent the concern for Muslims who represent one-fifth of humanity.
 - c. That the churches be asked to discuss and consider how the church in their area is being perceived and understood by Muslims, and how we are articulating our faith among Muslims, with the purpose of developing a more effective communication of the reconciling love of God.
- (4) Both Muslims and Christians have a high concern for practical issues, for "commending the good and prohibiting the evil," and for "caring for the neighbor." It is therefore recommended:
- a. That the churches be asked to develop specific cooperative activities with Muslims in the following areas:
 - issues related to the common good;

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- issues related to socio-economic justice;
 - issues related to human rights;
 - issues related to the stewardship for creation (ecology);
 - issues related to mutual education in regard to both Christianity and Islam, including caricature and conflict resolution.
- b. That the LWF through its publications highlight successful models and patterns of such cooperative activity.

"BUT GOD KNOWS BEST!"

APPENDIX

POTENTIAL AGENDA TOPICS FOR FUTURE DIALOGUE

I. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ISLAMIC ISSUES

- | | |
|--|---|
| - The concept of other religious communities | - sense of community, <i>umma</i> , family |
| - prayer, <i>ibādat</i> or worship | - responsibility for the structures of society |
| - anthropology: human nature | - loss of sense of God in Western society; secularism |
| - <i>hidāyat</i> or guidance | - citizenship in national contexts |
| - surrender to God | - religious faith and public life |
| - <i>imān</i> , faith, inner disposition | - materialism; corruption |
| - purification | - education; science |
| - sin, evil; goodness, piety | - ecology |
| - suffering | - human rights |
| - history and revelation | - mixed marriages |
| - meaningfulness of history | - the West and "westification" |
| - God's plan for now | |
| - salvation; prosperity; success | |
| - meaning of prophethood | |

II. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- Greatness of divine mercy; God in Christ; forgiveness of sins
- creation; God's covenant

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- God's initiative
- law and gospel
- justification by faith
- the function of prophecy
- servanthood
- the priesthood of all believers
- the nature of success; sacrifice
- two-kingdom theory; attaining a just society
- social involvement; religion and politics
- women/children
- a theology of dialogue
- a basis for Christian cooperation with Muslims
- Christian responses to Islamic issues noted above

III. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IMMEDIATE AND COMMON RELEVANCE

- Position of women
- spirituality
- neighborlogy
- mutuality; friendship; creating good relations at local/ international levels
- family
- ethical values /fight against corruption and exploitation
- materialism / consumerism / secularization
- human rights/ children's rights
- tolerance; religious freedom
- caricature, distortion, inflammatory language
- role and abuse of religion in situations of conflict; communalism; manipulation of religion; violence
- the phenomenon behind the term "fundamentalism"
- social justice issues; economic issues
- contemporary forms of slavery; migrant workers
- Christian-Muslim relations; cooperation; the common good.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND MISSION IN THE MIDST OF MANY THEOLOGIES AND MISSIONS

Israel Selvanayagam

THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The Christian Church throughout its history has faced many challenges and found answers, sometimes more satisfactory ones and at other times less satisfactory ones. The first church council (commonly called the Jerusalem Council) met in Jerusalem to deal with the question of prescribing the necessary rules and regulations of the Jewish religious tradition for the gentile converts. The decisions were characterized by a middle path relaxing the rigidity of the tradition but suggesting the basic minimum requirements. This was a correct solution for the council which claimed to have the approval of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). The other major challenge in the early history of the church was the upsurge of "heretical teachings." The solution included a variety of measures ranging from persecuting the "heretics" to formulating creeds. Then came the great schism of the 11th century that divided the Church into Western and Eastern, or Roman Catholic and Orthodox. Further, the challenges of the Renaissance led to the Reformation. Specific theological positions contributed to the development of different

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denominations which in turn resulted in a kind of missionary competition and confusion. The emergence of unending new movements and groups added to the complexity of the problem of a divided Church, and this has been the main concern of the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement in its various forms continues to define its nature, broaden its scope and clarify its function. In recent years, along with the individual churches, it has been facing many challenges such as those posed by secularism, the voices of the oppressed, international enmity and war, environmental disasters, conflicting economies and so on. In response, there have been a number of consultations, and many documents with theological-biblical reflections were produced.

Religious pluralism has been one of the most challenging issues confronting the Christian church. The age-long affirmation of the decisiveness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and its universal significance is being questioned, as well as the ambiguous ways in which the Christian mission has been carried out over the centuries. Mission has been particularly criticized for its association with colonial expansion and its role in damaging traditional cultures. Furthermore, in the process of communicating the gospel, Christians have many times violated one of the Ten Commandments by bearing false witness against their neighbors of other faiths. Now that the Christian domination in the world is weakening and the world religions and traditional cultures are becoming stronger, their representatives come and tell us, to our great embarrassment, "You are wrong!". Such criticism is apt to make the average, sensitive Christian quite nervous and distressed.

However, many Christians still continue the traditional pattern of doing mission. Some are intensifying their efforts to communicate the Christian message to people of other faiths and to convert them to Christianity. Such attempts cannot be condemned outright because the Christian faith is a kerygmatic faith and because Christians have a mandate enshrined in the Great Commission, i.e., "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19). But what these enthusiastic evangelical Christians have failed to recognize is that this mandate has been formulated or revised in different ways in the New Testament and in the prediction of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would guide his disciples "into all truth." For example, according to Mark, the disciples should go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation (16:15). For Luke, repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to all nations (24:47). His version in Acts puts it as "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem . . . and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Such formulations are multiplied and thus provide new dimensions and emphases (as also in the fourth Gospel and in the Epistles). The point here is that it is not proper to stick to only one formulation of the missionary mandate.

More significantly, those who originally received the mandate did not expect a challenge from other world religions. For instance, there is no clue in the New Testament about the existence of such Eastern religious traditions as Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. The first disciples never expected the emergence, five centuries later, of Islam with a claim for finality and for correction of the Christian beliefs. They had no idea that a synthetic religion such as Sikhism would appear, combining the Hindu idea of the human person and the Muslim idea of one God. Neither did they expect the

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reconstruction of the Jewish religious tradition in the 20th century (when the anti-Semitic attitude of Christians would cause the misinterpretation of the Hebrew Scripture and terrors such as the holocaust). Some of these religions are vigorous in mission work and call to Christians to join them. All these challenges are new to us and there is no single solution for them. In a sense, we are quite awed by the fact that also people of other faiths have a high sense of commitment to one God and the welfare of humanity. If we continue to uphold the validity of the Christian faith and if we feel the need of sharing it with others—while admitting the errors we committed in the past—what then should be our response and new approach to people of other faiths?

DIFFERENT KINDS OF RESPONSES

A majority of Christians have chosen not to understand other religions; or, if they know a few things about them, they ridicule their claim and preach them the gospel. They are not paying heed to Max Müller's words "He who knows one knows none." One reason for this position is their secret fear that knowing other religions will destabilize their Christian faith. But some missionaries overcame this fear and studied other religious traditions; thus they equipped themselves for fruitful interaction with the adherents of the traditions concerned. In most cases, although the initial aim was "to understand the enemy for a strategic action," the attempt ended with a pioneering work some of which later became part of the scientific study of religion or comparative religion. There are theologians who have found this study enriching

for Christian theology and necessary for correcting the Christian approach to people of other faiths.

The history of changing Christian approaches to people of other faiths, philosophies and ideologies is a long one. However, the most intensive discussions on the Christian attitude to the world religions have taken place in the 20th century. They began with the first missionary encounters with resurgent religions at the beginning of this century; for instance, in 1910, at the first International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. They continued in many forms and at various levels. It will be helpful to acknowledge the threefold theological model that emerged, i.e., that of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*. Before arguing for a more pluralistic approach to religious pluralism, let me point out different positions within each of its parts.

There are crude forms and mild forms of *exclusivism*. For example, there are Christians who find that adherents of other religions have no other use than to fuel the fires of hell. Others suggest that they are not that important, as the fuel is eternally in stock and that they will suffer in hell for ever. For both, even what good is to be found in other religions must be seen as an emanation of the devil. There are others still who hold that whatever may be good in other religions, the divine revelation is only in and through Jesus Christ. For them, Jesus is the only way, name, and truth leading to salvation. While partly sharing this position, some take pains to explain the meaning of this affirmation in the biblical context and in relation to people of other faiths. For example, they point out that the way of Jesus is neither easy nor a shortcut but one of suffering. While they feel they are committed to this way, which has an universal appeal, this their commitment by no means leads them to belittle outright

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similar commitments found among people of other faiths. They think that commitment to Jesus' way goes well with an openness for other ways.

The *inclusive* model has found a variety of expressions. Clement of Alexandria spoke of *logos spermatikos* by which he meant that the seeds of the Word or the rays of the Light are present in all religions and philosophies. Thomas Aquinas suggested accepting the concept of reincarnation. In the modern period, Christ, or Christianity, has been seen by many as the crown of all religions, fulfilling all aspirations and being law for all. Some have seen Christ as unknown or hidden in religions, receiving all genuine devotion and stimulating liberation. The belief in the cosmic presence of Christ has led a few to declare a sort of anonymous Christianity. There are those who replace Christ with kingdom of God which is an all inclusive framework accepting all glories and good values wherever they are to be found. In all these expressions, the name of the hidden power or reality is still Christ or kingdom of God. This could be seen as a subtle and indirect form of exclusivism.

There are also the *pluralists*. For them, all religions are essentially similar and equally valid. This is a typical Hindu position, but in the West it is termed a Copernican revolution in theology of religions. This position ridicules as a myth any claim for uniqueness. While there is no consensus on the essence of all religions, the pluralists have yet to explain whether all religions known in history, with all their aspects, are part of their scheme or only a selection. They also seem to fall short of a comprehensive view of the religions, which would take into consideration all dimensions of religious life, including the various forms of rituals, as they tend to reduce religion to an ethical principle. According to some, each

religion projects only one aspect of the Ultimate Truth and all these partial projections must be put together in order to get the complete picture. The usual illustration of this is the popular Buddhist folk tale of the six blind men who are sensing with their fingertips different parts of an elephant. But what is the common character of all the parts? Do they know what the whole elephant is like? Questions such as these have not been answered convincingly.

Without elaborating further on the threefold model of religious pluralism, let me make some short remarks. First, such a model is not exclusively a Christian achievement. It can be found in other religions as well, particularly in Hinduism. Second, all those who seriously believe in one God cannot but grapple with the question of relating the different God experiences and expressions to one God. Third, replacing God with Christ has caused confusion, as Christ is originally a Jewish figure or concept and one of the many titles ascribed to Jesus. Fourth, ignoring the irreconcilable differences between religions and ridiculing their fundamental affirmations as exclusive or triumphalist has led to another kind of absolutism. Particularly the pluralists are guilty of this pitfall. Fifth, if we take the different types of religious people we meet in flesh and blood, it is difficult to be content with one of the above models. The way one religion relates to the other is not the same in every case. Christianity's relationship, for instance, with Judaism and Islam is not the same as that with Hinduism. Also, we meet religious people with a variety of positions within a religion ranging from nominalism to fanaticism. Therefore, a pluralistic approach which depends on the particular religion under consideration and on the particular religious person we encounter seems to be more appropriate. Sixth, several

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of those who uncritically exalt other religions and criticize Christianity, particularly the pluralists, express no sympathy for the missionary obligation of Christians, which is fundamental to their faith. They seem to exempt Christians deliberately from their "equal respect for all religions." Whereto we are moving is not always clear. Here I suggest a re-view of the original foundation of our theology and mission.

INSIGHTS GAINED FROM THE EARLY CHRISTIAN APPROACHES

Jesus and his disciples lived in a context which was religiously different from ours. However, what they said and did at some crucial moments gives us clues for a proper understanding of theology and mission in today's multifaith situations. The fundamental openness exercised by Jesus can speak volumes. More specifically, he recognized faith beyond the boundaries of his religious tradition. He appreciated the "faith" of a Roman centurion (Mt. 8:10), a Canaanite woman (15:28) and a Samaritan (Lk. 17:19)—all outsiders demonstrating an extraordinary ability to transcend the status quo and the customary norms, something which was absent from his own tradition of (believers). Don't we see people of such extraordinary faith among the Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists today?

The Book of Acts, which is known as the first handbook on mission and the work of the Holy Spirit, portrays some striking aspects of the early church's expression of God, Jesus and its approach to outsiders. Of course, the mission which

was authenticated by dramatic signs and wonders is not the point of our immediate concern here; nor are the references to the Hebrew scriptures as foretelling the advent of Jesus. Rather we will point out a few instances of missionary behavior and look at the content of some of the preaching. We have to look at them afresh and clean our glasses of doctrinal and denominational stains.

Peter's Pentecostal sermon has the following notes: Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested by God with mighty works and wonders (2:22). He was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, but God raised him and made him both Lord and Christ (2:23). Repentance and forgiveness of sins was mentioned as the hearers' response (2:38).

The verse 4:12 ("no other name") is frequently quoted as the surest clue for an exclusive claim. But a preliminary exegesis of this verse reveals that the context was not a discussion on religious pluralism but the question was in whose name a lame was brought to sound health or salvation. The name was not taken as magical, but as a personal characterization converted into liberative action. The language was one of love, echoing a sense of caress and liturgy. In the same context Peter says that the God of the forefathers glorified his servant Jesus who was holy, righteous and the author of life (3:13-15). The call is again for repentance which will lead to forgiveness, refreshing and coming from the presence of the Lord, so that he may send the Messiah appointed for them, Jesus (3:19,20). After the arrest, when Peter and John were freed, the band of disciples lifted their voices to God, the sovereign Lord, the creator, who had anointed his servant Jesus (4:24,27). Further, in the council also Peter and the apostles said,

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"The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed . . . God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (5:30,31).

Stephen, in his defensive speech narrating the story of Israel, told the Jewish audience that Jesus the Righteous One was coming in the long line of prophets who had been persecuted by their fathers. At the time of his death, Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God," (7:55), and prayed "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit . . . Lord do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60).

Paul met Jesus in a mysterious way as the living Lord, but vulnerable, in solidarity with his persecuted followers. The change in Paul was marked by a radical shift from persecuting Jesus to suffering for the sake of his name (9:4-6,18). He proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God (9:20). His initial zeal led him to go about in Jerusalem and to preach boldly in the name of the Lord. "And he spoke and argued with the Hellenists" (9:29).

It stands to reason to call Peter's initial hesitation and further decision to visit Cornelius the second conversion of an evangelist. This conversion led him further to declare, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34,35). Of course he does not finish here but adds, "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, peace by Jesus Christ . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him . . . God raised him . . .

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:36–43).

Paul in his preaching to the Jews claimed that at a point in God's continued dealings with them a message of salvation was sent through Jesus who was unjustly killed; but God raised him from the dead fulfilling his promise to the ancestors. Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and by him everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which they could not be freed by the law of Moses (13:23–43). When this message was rejected, Paul turned to the Gentiles. But he continued to talk to Jews wherever he met them and everywhere his message to the Jewish audience was "The Messiah is Jesus" (17:3, 18:5,28).

In Lystra, following the miraculous healing of a crippled man and the local people's declaration that Paul and Barnabas were gods in human form, Paul said,

Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy (14:15–18).

This message is essentially Jewish and there is no mention of Jesus. The apostles entrusted the believers to the Lord and

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appointed elders for them in every church (14:23). As we have already noted, the first church council met in Jerusalem to discuss the question of prescribing the Jewish customs for the Gentile converts. The council was not rigid but generous showing a spirit of openness even in the midst of hectic missionary activities.

Paul's speech before the Areopagus at Athens is most remarkable. He affirms the universal acts of God as creator, life-giver, sustainer, and companion of all human beings while he denounces limiting God to an idol or temple (17:24-30). Then he adds, "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (17:30,31). The response was varied.

We read of Paul *arguing* with people, both with Jews and Gentiles, particularly the religious leaders and scholars (17:2, 18:4, 19:8,9). The mood and matter of these arguments is not clear. There are a few clues: "... argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer" (17:2); "[he] argued persuasively about the kingdom of God" (19:8). From these indications we can infer that Paul's (and other apostles' too) basic framework was still Jewish, one universal God and his reign, and that the new horizon was marked by the Jesus factor. The recurring call was "... repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus" (20:21). The ministry received from the Lord Jesus was to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (20:25). In other words it was, like Jesus, preaching the kingdom (20:24) and those who responded

were commended to God and to the message of his grace which was able to build them up (20:32).

That the message at times was misunderstood was unavoidable and there were moments when it was twisted for selfish ends. For example, in Philippi the healing of a slave girl who had the spirit of divination adversely affected the gain of her owners. Paul and Silas were taken to court with the accusation that "These men are disturbing our city, they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe" (16:20,21). In Thessalonica, they were criticized for turning the Roman world upside down; that they were acting against the decrees of the Caesar, saying that there was another king, Jesus (17:7). In Corinth the complaint was "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law" (18:13). In Ephesus the number of those converted affected the business of the silversmiths who made silver shrines of the goddess Artemis, and of the craftsmen (19:19-24). But it was noted that the apostles were neither sacrilegious nor blasphemous of the goddess (19:37). These examples show the socio-economic-political and religious implications of a positive response to the gospel although the apostles never offended anyone's particular feelings or religious sentiments.

So far Paul had missed no chance to preach the gospel. But there were new situations in which he changed his pattern, from preaching to being a witness. His last journey on a ship to Rome gives examples of this (ch. 27). Obviously the passengers of this ship were of many religions—there must have been Jews, Greeks and Romans—along with a few Christians who were accompanying Paul made prisoner and who was being taken to a final trial. Paul had already

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had foreseen that the voyage would end in damage and loss, not only of the ship and its cargo, but also of the passengers' lives. He told the authorities but they paid no attention. Then a violent storm arose.

Paul came forward and pointed out that he had warned them. But he did not leave it at that. He asked them to take heart and told them that there would be no loss of life among them but only loss of the ship, according to a communication he had received from an angel of God the previous night. He asked them again to take heart as he had faith in God. On the fourteenth night, while the authorities were having secret consultations, Paul urged all to take some food as they had been starving for fourteen days. He encouraged them by saying that not a hair was to be lost from the head of any of them. Then he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. All were encouraged and ate some food. However, a shipwreck could not be avoided. And even then, all escaped to an island because the centurion, wishing to save Paul, perhaps after getting a good impression about him in the turmoil, had thwarted a plan of the soldiers to kill all the prisoners.

After their escape, another interesting experience was awaiting them on the island, which was Malta. The natives were showing unusual kindness, kindling a fire because it had begun to rain and it was cold (28:2). Thus, beyond verbal communication, the natives immediately turned into hosts and the strangers became their guests. A dramatic event followed. When Paul gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire a viper coming out of the heated sticks fastened onto his hand. According to the belief of the natives this was a sign that he was a murderer. But Paul shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. The people,

finding that no misfortune happened to Paul, thought he was a god. The story ends with the chief of the island receiving the guests. Paul cures the chief's sick father by praying for him and for many others. The islanders give gifts to Paul and his party and put on board all that is needed.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

From what we have observed in the Book of Acts and in the light of the multifaith context and its challenges today, we can make the following concluding remarks:

- (1) Christian mission is based on the theological preamble that God is one, the creator and sustainer of all people. As long as we believe in one God we cannot say "our God" and "your God." The acts of God are referred to in the history of Israel, but God's concern is for all people. He is the source of all goodness. God cannot be supposed to be like an image shaped by human craftsmanship and design, but he can be perceived by them in different ways.
- (2) The exact relationship of God with the world religions is not clear. We have sure ground to believe that God is present in every religion, but he is not passive but active and even critical. Divine initiatives and human deviations, therefore, have to be acknowledged. Christianity is not an exception. Christians should have no problem in appropriating different experiences and expressions of God as long as they testify to God as the supreme being who is loving, just and compassionate. For example, Christians need not have any difficulty in

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proclaiming with the Muslims that God is great. If we relate all the genuine God experiences, we can realize with a sense of wonder that God is much greater than what we can imagine. Similarly, when some Hindu devotees sing that God and love are inseparable, we may well say "Amen." But at the same time we may have genuine difficulties in incorporating peculiar myths and mythological formulations. We also may be bewildered when religions convey contradictory views of the world, the human personality and their vision of the future under one God who is too great for them. Therefore the above affirmations should not lead us to a compromise with regard to the greatness and love of God and the world view that is portrayed in the Bible and revealed in the life and death of Jesus unless we are convinced by something else that would call for a radical shift.

- (3) The apostles understood that God had done something new in and through Jesus. It was a gift which was available for all. Further, they repeatedly proclaimed that it was God who sent Jesus, ordained him, appointed him, raised him from the dead and made him Christ, Lord and Savior. For them Jesus never replaced God. In a mood of ecstasy and desperation Stephen and Paul saw Jesus as the risen Lord and prayed to him. Although they found value and meaning for their personal devotion in this experience, they never proposed a metaphysical theory nor did they build a cult around Jesus. The popular fundamentalist Christianity practicing and propagating a Jesus cult in fact represents a terrible deviation from the original perception. They seem to be uncomfortable with a general universal

category such as God but want to maintain a separate identity with the name of Jesus. In South India I have seen writings on the walls taken from the Hebrew scripture in which the term "Lord" is replaced by "Jesus."

- (4) Christ, Lord and Savior were titles ascribed to Jesus after his resurrection. These titles had direct appeal to the Jewish-Roman-Greek context. Repeating them in other contexts, without proper explanation, does not convey the meaning of Jesus and the gospel. Following is an attempt at clarification. Jesus as the Messiah did not fulfill all the Jewish expectations. He might still meet people's expectations in unexpected ways. And by perceiving Christ as a cosmic principle operating both before and after Jesus, Paul and other apostles provided the space for recognizing this principle in different ways in different cultures. Even if the name Christ is risked, it is for Christ's sake. And when the early Christians proclaimed Jesus as the Lord, they indirectly implied that the Roman emperor was not the Lord. There is no clue for us to think that they viewed this Lord as identical with Yahweh, Adonai, the Lord of Lords. Jesus has been made Lord by God to bring authorities and powers under his crucified but not crusading authority. The divine presence is a new field of force in which Jesus, crucified and risen, remains the central referent. Likewise, Jesus is the saviour as expected particularly in some mystery religions. He is not simply the saviour of the soul, but the whole person and the whole universe.
- (5) The later perception that Jesus was revealing God was not expressed in a single formula. In one sense Jesus was

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sent by God and in another the eternal word became flesh. A variety of imageries are used in the New Testament for explaining Jesus' relationship to God, such as son, heir, reflector, stamp, image and fullness. It is confusing to declare that Jesus is God using the formula of *homoousios* without admitting the long process involved in finding this formula and explaining the sense in which we use it. It is more modest to say that Jesus of Nazareth, a devout Jew and a prophet, after his resurrection, was confessed as Christ, Lord and Savior and still later perceived as revealing God, particularly God's suffering love. Even the Trinity doctrine cannot be the starting point as there is every danger of limiting the Son to his earthly life as Jesus of Nazareth while expounding the meaning of Trinity as a social being and reality, providing room for plurality with a balance. We should be generous in using all the images and titles of Jesus found in the New Testament and in explaining the relevance and meaning of each of them today. Similarly, the idea of atonement is not mentioned in Acts, and again later it was one of the several meanings of the cross of Jesus.

- (6) Today, Jesus is popularly seen as one of the many figures projected by the world religions. Without denouncing the other figures Christians are called to witness to the specific or decisive revelation of God in Jesus. According to the early apostles, God appointed Jesus through whom he will judge the world. In this sense Jesus becomes a normative figure for evaluating the quality of human life and the nature of divine love, but this norm is not contained in a set of laws and doctrines. Jesus continues to be normative for Christians in the sense

that he provides most profound insights for a meaningful life. A meaningful life is not exhausted in the moral life of an individual but demonstrated in a community which seriously tries to follow Jesus in all aspects and in a spirit of openness.

This last point is most significant. The judgement of God through Jesus starts in his household. While claiming that the divine mystery has been revealed in Jesus, the Christians have a long way to go to comprehend the depth, breath, length and height of the love of God in Jesus (Eph 3:16ff.). They must prove to the world that they do not project and worship Jesus as a white tribal god but that they continue to bow down before the paradoxical Lamb, with its seven horns and seven eyes, which signifies on the one hand perfect authority and penetrating presence, and on the other stands as though slaughtered (Rev. 5:6; 13:8), demonstrating vulnerability.

- (7) Mission has not been the invention of certain Christian religious enthusiasts out of their sympathy for the world. It primarily defines the purpose of Christian existence, as a community, a church. In accordance with the mandate recorded in John's Gospel Christians are sent into the world in continuation of God's sending his Son Jesus into the world and empowered by his Spirit. Above all, Christians are called to participate in God's continued mission with a sense of being sent wherever they are.
- (8) Mission is multi-dimensional and liberative. Despite the ambiguous ways in which Christian mission has been carried out in the past, one positive effect for which sensitive people continue to be grateful is the liberation

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it has brought to people who were socially oppressed and economically backward. The role of Christian mission in peoples' movements in different parts of the world is a pointed reference. But at the same time it must be admitted that the liberative aspect of mission has been forgotten and it has been reduced to "soul winning"; and, more painfully, Christians have contributed to maintaining oppressive systems. Moreover, there are groups, both religious and secular, who are involved in liberative activities. Even the traditional missionary charity works have been taken up by people of other religions. For example, there are Hindu missions running hospitals, schools and refugee homes. Similarly, some secular groups in India are more radical and committed than the churches in acts of liberation. In such situations the churches, instead of continuing the outdated patterns of mission inherited from the colonial period, should work hand in hand with other groups, joining forces for liberation.

- (9) Evangelism is one aspect of mission. Even if the terms mission and evangelism are misleading today because of undesirable overload of misconceptions they carry, there is a place for witnessing to the gospel. The gospel is not a single formula but a spectrum containing promises and challenges. It is about the reign of God demanding a new orientation in life involving repentance and forgiveness. The reign of God is characterized by justice, peace and love. The central point of reference to its nature is the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus who is made to reign as the crucified Lord until he brings all powers to the feet of God. A response to this point is asked for but the course of action is not

dictated. However, we should not lose confidence in the value of the gospel, for it continues to be relevant as long as there are people of all faiths and no faith needs to repent and understand the real nature of love as suffering for others. Moreover, again it should be made clear that sharing the gospel is a duty laid upon every Christian, and people of other faiths need to have sympathy for this fundamental religious duty. It is interesting to note that while a few states in India have passed bills to ban conversion, due to Christian mission, some Hindu thinkers argued that it was the Christians' fundamental duty to propagate their religion and that their preference for freedom of religion and separation of church and state was justified.

- (10) The church is not an office to register souls for a life after death. She is a humble servant participating in God's mission with commitment and openness. The conservative or fundamentalist church is the worst stumbling block for communicating the gospel today. No other form of hypocrisy is more awkward than the one found in a church which is enthusiastic about converting people of other faiths into its fold but without willing to make any changes in its structure, liturgy and pattern of ministry.

RESPONSE

Péri Rasolondraibe

First of all, I should like to thank Dr I. Selvanayagam for this excellent paper. I can say that we are dealing here with someone who knows his subject well and has taken time and care in putting down on paper his thoughts about theologies and missions. The more one reads, the more one finds depth of meaning.

To be brief, I should like to make my comments in three points and then add a final point to ask for clarification.

(1) It seems to me that the key question to the whole paper is the sentence which reads,

If we continue to uphold the validity of the Christian faith and if we feel the need of sharing it with others— while admitting the errors we committed in the past—what then should be our response and new approach to people of other faiths?

Responding to this problematic, Dr Selvanayagam suggests an approach which is different from the three traditional theological models, to wit, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (of these, pluralism received the most criticism). The new approach for Dr Selvanayagam is “commitment with openness.” This means, commitment to what God has revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as universally valid, and openness to experiences and

expressions of God in other religions. In another article,¹ the presenter called this approach “dialogical evangelism and evangelistic dialogue.”

I think that this model responds to our question whether Christians should only listen to and learn from people of other faiths or should also have something to share with others. It is, however, important to note that “witnessing,” according to Dr Selvanayagam, involves the life of the whole Christian community, as a life through which God continues what was begun in Jesus (page). These days, we talk, in a similar way, about “holistic ministry,” when the gospel is not only proclaimed (enunciated or verbalized) but also made real in people’s lives.

(2) In my second comment, I should like to highlight Dr Selvanayagam’s way of linking together faith and mission in the process of dialogue.

In the course of a dialogue, Christians should make their partners understand that Christianity is a kerygmatic religion, meaning that mission is an intrinsic part of the Christian faith. For the Christian, sharing the gospel with others is a joy and a privilege. All missionary religions, the presenter explains, should understand the meaning of religious duty; mission is part of such a duty.

It should be helpful for churches engaged in evangelism if they could develop this way of making themselves understood by people of other faiths, as they themselves try to understand others and their mission endeavors. With genuine openness to others, we need to recognize that we cannot deprive others of the gift of the gospel to be shared as we received it. In this sense, Christian mission in the midst of other missions is possible.

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(3) But then, there is the matter of Christian theology and mission. Dr Selvanayagam devoted a large portion of his paper discussing mission theology or biblical theology of mission, dealing specifically with the place of Jesus in God's mission.

If I understand his intent correctly, he would like us to put more emphasis on the gospel rather than on Jesus. For the presenter, Jesus should not be portrayed as an object of worship, a "white tribal god," but as the paradoxical Lamb of the Book of Revelation—"having authority yet vulnerable." He writes:

The gospel is not a single formula but a spectrum containing promises and challenges. It is about the reign of God demanding a new orientation in life involving repentance and forgiveness. The reign of God is characterized by justice, peace and love. The central point of reference to its nature is the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus who is made to reign as the crucified Lord until he brings all powers to the feet of God. A response to this point is asked for but the course of action is not dictated.

I can see the value of the emphasis on the gospel and the reign of the crucified Lord for the fostering of an atmosphere conducive to dialogue between and peaceful communal living with people of other faiths. I seriously wonder, however, if Christians can separate the gospel from the person of Jesus Christ without reducing it to the level of concepts and ideologies about God's reign. Is the gospel not anchored in the "news" that God, in Jesus, has shared divine life with what is not God and thus has brought what was created to share in God's eternity?

Moreover, emphasis on the crucified Lord can be very relevant, especially as theological basis for mission endeavors by churches in countries which are culturally prone to dominate others. But I wonder if this can be applied across all religions and situations or should we rather be selective, depending on the situation, as Dr Selvanayagam himself suggests to the pluralists. In Africa, for instance, Jesus as the source and sustainer of life abundant may be the Christ who speaks more clearly to us. One may also wonder about people, Christians who are oppressed and call for liberation. In what way would the emphasis on the crucified Lamb help in the formulation of a theology of liberation?

Finally, a point of clarification, Dr Selvanayagam writes: "Christians should have no problems in appropriating different experiences and expressions of God as long as they testify to God as the supreme being who is loving, just and compassionate." These divine perfections (supreme, loving, just and compassionate), I take it, are to be used as standard measurements for religious affirmations about God—and that they are the parameters beyond which conversion takes place. My question is: Where are they from? What sets them above all other affirmations about God? Shouldn't these be also submitted to discussion in the course of a dialogue?

Thank you once again.

NOTE

- ¹ "Evangelism and Inter-Faith Dialogue: Are they incompatible or complementary?" in Occasional Paper No. 13, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

EXPLORATIONS IN LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVES ON PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

Paul Varo Martinson

INTRODUCTION

We will shortly be entering upon a discussion of six thematic sets. My task, as I understand it, is to say something about the themes, and ways in which Lutheran convictions intersect with them.

I believe that a first step to meeting the mandate given us by the LWF requires that we give guidance to help ground our churches theologically so as to encourage a greater determination to enter into relationship with their neighbors of other persuasions. My purpose in this presentation will be largely limited to this immediate purpose.

My paper, therefore, is not intended to be inspirational, though in its own way I hope it will be. My concern is to try and unearth some of the theology that is implicit, or I believe should be implicit, in our work as Lutherans, and to make it explicit. I will do this by dealing briefly with each of the thematic groups that are before us.

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GROUP I: HISTORICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL, CONTEXTUAL THEMES

The first thematic set has to do with historical, epistemological and contextual themes. The assumption I believe in putting this thematic set first is that our relation to people of other faiths takes its point of departure from the real world of our life together. The point of view from which we perceive others, our epistemology in short, is profoundly conditioned by the history and present context of our life together.

WHAT SORT OF EPISTEMOLOGY?

Some time ago I addressed a pastor's conference in Austin, Minnesota, on Islam. Islam is quite a popular topic today in North America. At the lunch, before I spoke, I noticed a man who seemed not to be a pastor and who had a Middle Eastern complexion. I was invited to sit down across from him, wondering as I did so if he was Muslim or Christian. As it turned out he was an Egyptian Coptic Christian. He had been invited by one of the pastors, who knew he had an interest in Christian-Muslim relations. After my presentation, he stood up in the back and began what it appeared might be rather lengthy comments. He was accordingly invited forward to express his views. Some weeks after this I received a letter from him. He began this letter saying that he did not know from my presentation whether I was a Christian or a Muslim. If I were a Muslim, then he felt I had made a good presentation. But if I were a Christian, then he had some grave concerns. In short, as

he had done that afternoon, he launched into an attack upon Islam and its prophet, denouncing Islam for its violence and defaming the prophet for his sexual license.

The first question under this thematic set raises the question of forgiveness and its place in interfaith relations. This Coptic Christian was clearly speaking from a weight of resentment built up over the ages and experienced in acute and violent ways yet today. There was no forgiveness. Thus, he viewed my understanding of Islam as overly partial, and I viewed his perspective as harsh. One sees here the power of epistemology. Our epistemology (what we see and how we know what we see) is shaped by history, context and our response to it.

A basic rule for honest relations between religious communities is well known. It is simply the rule of equivalence: relate your best to my best; your worst to my worst. It is much easier to make uneven comparisons, to compare someone else's worst with my best or the inverse, someone else's best with my worst. I have just given an example of the first. The inverted order generally arises from a deep sense of guilt about the past history of mission and colonialism. In this case one may magnify the good in another tradition and contrast that to the worst in the Christian tradition. The first yields an epistemology of resentment, the inverted order an epistemology of self-abasement. Neither epistemology is going to take us forward in our relations with people of other faiths. Resentment fuels enmity; self-abasement fuels disdain. The only way forward, at least for us as Lutheran Christians, is an epistemology of the cross. I will try to speak to that more directly later.

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FRAMING THE CONTEXT

As I look at the contemporary global context and the way it shapes our relations with people of other faiths, I note two dominant tendencies. I will term these a tendency towards integration, and a tendency towards identity.

The tendency towards integration is driven today above all by economics. There is a relentless drive to bring about global economic interdependence. This is facilitated as well by the information and communications revolution that is taking place. No place is exempt from its influence.

At the same time there is a tendency towards identity. This is represented by the new importance of communities of identity we find everywhere. This community might be ethnic, it might be religious, it might be a nation, it might be a mix of all of these. Bosnia, not to mention many other phenomena worldwide, is a prime example of this. The desire is to experience communities of meaning that give one identity and value in life.

Each of these tendencies bring both promise and threat. The promise of integration is that there might finally be an end to war and a day in which there will be freedom, justice and equality for all in a world made safe from all kinds of danger. The threat of integration has to do with power—who finally will wield it in the world; will it be the few rich and powerful? To whom will those that rule be ultimately accountable? The promise of identity is that people find a safe haven where they can cultivate meaning and value in life. The threat is that of fragmentation, that each community will define itself over against others whom it will perceive as enemy and threat.

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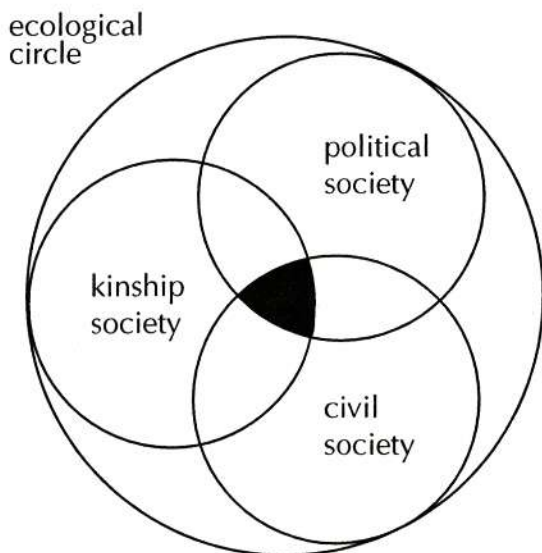
How do we relate as a community amidst other communities to these twin tendencies—global integration, specific identity? How do our separate past histories relate to them? How live in the present and create a future? I think this is the broad contextual question that faces us.

GROUP II: SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL THEMES

INTERLOCKING CIRCLES

Given the two broad tendencies, as I look at our human community I think in terms of at least three interlocking circles. The first circle I will call *kinship society*. By this I mean that form of community most directly represented by the family. But it can also take larger forms, such as clan, tribe and race. The key values that pertain to this social circle are those of nurture and intimacy. The family is the most intimate form of communal identity. The second circle I will call *civil society*. By this I mean that wider form of community represented by neighborhood and city, the community within which I seek to participate through work and play and other kinds of social activity. The key values here can best be spoken of as related to benefit—I work so as to earn a livelihood, I interact with others to find enjoyment and enrichment in life. Often it takes the form of competition. There are all kinds of interest groups; there are concerns for equal access; there is the quest for rights and recognition. The third circle I will call *political society*. This is that realm of society in which the concern is to exercise power to govern and order all the rest of society. The key value here is the value of justice, however defined. Political society

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governs kinship and civil society so that justice might be realized.

In addition to these three social circles I would add a fourth, the *ecological* circle. This refers to the realm of nature. Not even modern industrial society, where it seems nature has been left far behind, can escape its location in the natural order. The issue of environmental degradation and our gleaming but fume-laden cities are sufficient evidence of that.

Between, within and amongst these several circles are all kinds of tensions. The family is in tension with civil society, with its economic structures and social requirements. Both are in tension with the political order. All of society is in tension with the natural world.

The first question under this thematic set asks about the living context within which we meet our neighbor. These circles, I suggest, indicate this living context. Where does the church exist in relation to these circles? Does it identify with kinship society? Then, like caste, apartheid, Zionism it is an ethnic religion. Does it identify with civil society? Then it is like a club or a corporation. Does it identify with political society? Then we have caesaro-papism, or "Khomeinism," or some other form of nationalism. Does it seek to escape society and become an alternative community that is pure and unsullied? Then it is a sect which seeks to get back too quickly to the garden of Eden and the purity of the ecological circle. The church rightly finds its location at the place of greatest ambiguity, at the location where all the circles intersect. There it meets its neighbor. To use the diagram above, it is located at the darkened space in the center. Here it experiences a boundary existence as it lives in the midst of life—in the world but not *of* the world.

FREELY SUBJECT TO THE LAW

What then does the church do? First, it proclaims the gospel, the gospel that would bring about our conversion. What conversion? A conversion from self-regard to other-regard. God has so regarded us in Jesus Christ that we need no longer be self-regarding but are freed to regard our neighbor. The gospel calls for nothing less than this conversion within the Christian community. Second, it lives through its members in their manifold vocations in the world, seeking the welfare of all.

No one has put these things better than did Luther in his opening lines of "On Christian Liberty." There he writes:

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"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none: a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."¹ To be free lord of all is simply to declare our justification by faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We have been released from the enslaving powers of the devil, the world and our own flesh, in short sin. And so we are free lords. To be a dutiful servant of all is simply to declare that we live in the realm of the law, that is, towards the needs of our neighbor. The first word declares our freedom from all compulsions. The second word declares our free subjection to all forms of compulsion. This is nothing other than the doctrine of the two kingdoms. We live a double existence of freedom and slavery. As Jesus freely submitted to the demands of the law so do we. Luther puts it so well: "everyone should 'put on' his neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other's place. . . . [Christ] . . . has so 'put on' us and acted for us as if he had been what we are. . . . We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor."²

This, I submit, is our point of departure for addressing these other questions: What do we share in common with people of other religions? What is the basis of our cooperation? What about economic deprivation and transformation? What about women and the transformation of women's roles?" We simply ask, "What does the law say?" Jesus, we recall, gave an answer to that: "Go and do likewise."³

This does not mean there are any easy answers to these questions. To take the case of women, for instance. In earlier years we might rail against temple prostitution of girls, sati, bound feet, exposure of infant girls, female illiteracy,

polygamy, clitoridectomy. But today, even the Christian community has found how much it has contributed to a long history of the oppression and subjection of women to male-defined stereotypes. So the problem is not only external (out there), but internal (in here). Neither can we pretend the norms of justice are easily agreed upon. Traditional Religions, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, all have their own internal definitions of what constitutes justice. Only as we "put on" the neighbor can we find a way to deal with these matters constructively.

GROUP III: THEOLOGY: CREATION, REVELATION

Creation might refer to the fact that all things have an origin beyond themselves. If that is what is meant, then there will be lots in common with Judaism and Islam, with theistic forms of Hinduism, and many Traditional Religions. It is not so with others like Buddhism. Creation might also refer to the fact that all things, whether originated or spontaneous, have an internal principle of ordering. If this is meant, then there will be much in common with all the religious commitments.

All religions, I believe, acknowledge creation in this second sense. That is, the world is a given, and is internally structured. This internal structure might be conceived in physical (inorganic/organic realms for instance) or in psychological (subject/object) or in moral (good/bad) or in religious (sacred/profane) terms. In my opinion it is the moral character of the universe that is the most basic meeting ground for the religions. There might be entirely different

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cosmologies and cosmogonies, but whatever the differences it is the moral sphere that forces us to take serious account of each other and the world around us.

Christians believe that this world derives its value from its originator, God. The internal structure of the world is not autonomous and self-referring, but points to that which is beyond it—to God. Creation is other than God; but as other, it is intrinsically related to God. Therefore, the creation is a realm of relatedness to God, a realm of revelation, a realm in which God is made present to us all in some way.

To be sure, "No one has ever seen God."⁴ Thus, one could just as easily say that God is absent from the world as present in it, at least on the basis of empirical evidence. We also believe that, "It is God the only Son . . . who has made him known."⁵ But Jesus is a particular historical event. Not everyone knows this story. And many, though they have heard it, do not make the connection between Jesus and God that is so evident to Christians.

We also believe that God's presence is nevertheless universally palpable through the Spirit. The Spirit is the power of God that hovered over the original chaos.⁶ The Spirit gives wisdom in all kinds of skills and arts.⁷ The Spirit is the power of God that searches the very mind of God.⁸ The Spirit is that presence of God that articulates the longing for freedom of the cosmos itself.⁹ It is the same Spirit that animates the church, giving to it its life, whether that life be expressed in community,¹⁰ in prayer,¹¹ in confession,¹² in proclamation,¹³ or discernment.¹⁴ This Spirit is like the wind, which blows hither and thither and cannot be pinned down.¹⁵ But whatever it does it gives life to all things¹⁶ and brings transformation into life.¹⁷

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Since we believe these things, we as Christians have every reason to be interested in everything about us in the world, including most certainly, other religions. For the same Spirit that gives life to the church is the Spirit that has animated the world from the beginning and that breathes and moves in all things.¹⁸ It is impossible on biblical grounds to limit the working of the Spirit to the church or even the historical Jesus. Our understanding of creation, therefore, requires that we enter with expectancy into the common space of existence and life that we share with all other things.

In itself the Spirit, of course, can become an empty category, with no specific content. If so, it can be filled with anything that impresses one. As Christians we cannot do so. There is a criterion. The narrative of Jesus Christ. "When the Spirit of truth comes," we read in John, "he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears."¹⁹ Elsewhere we read that Jesus, the personal Word of God,²⁰ is "the way, and the truth, and the life."²¹ Only that which coheres with Jesus Christ can be considered of the Spirit. Nevertheless, we need to keep attentive to two complementary dimensions of the Spirit—its universal activity; its specific tie with the Word.

Let me give a personal illustration to indicate what I mean. In the 1960s, while working in Hong Kong, I attended lectures at a graduate program in Chinese studies at then New Asia College. It was led by several leading Confucian, Chinese scholars. While an auditing student there I heard that the mother of one of the professors, whose lectures I was attending, had died in China. T'ang Chun-yi, her son, was unable to return for her funeral. At that time there was a bamboo curtain, as it was called. Nevertheless, he arranged

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for a memorial service at a small temple in what used to be Shatin valley. I decided to attend.

There were about 30 to 40 students and professors gathered for the event. Some Buddhist monks were chanting sutras to one side. As a good filial son, T'ang was honoring his mother's devotion to Buddhism. T'ang himself was up in front dressed in sackcloth. At center-front were a flower wreath, his mother's picture, and incense. Everyone was quietly waiting for the arrival of Ch'ien Mu, who was to perform the ritual. Ch'ien Mu, a noted historian, was of diminutive stature—hardly five feet tall. Yet he cut an impressive figure dressed, as he always was, in a blue Confucian scholar's gown. After some time his arrival was announced. The group opened up to let Ch'ien Mu through, who strode with grave steps up to the front. He bowed deeply. The whole group bowed with him. Only myself, in the back, remained standing upright, perhaps with a slight nod of the head. It was absolutely quiet. A second time he bowed, and all with him. A third time he bowed and all with him. Only I remained upright. Then, he slowly turned and walked out whence he had come. The ritual was over. At that point I resolved that I would never let this happen to me again. Was I worried about idolatry? Whatever the reason, it had made me unable to share in the grief of a filial son as he honored his mother for whom he was unable to perform the deeds expected of a filial son. I had closed myself off from sharing in that grief.

What does this have to do with the Spirit's activity? Much, I believe. Doubtless the Spirit of God was present that day. I believe it spoke to me. Is it the Spirit that calls a filial son to grief? Is it the Spirit that draws friends and colleagues to share in the mourning? Is it the Spirit that invites us to

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honor one another, not least those who have recently died? Might the Spirit even have had something to do with the chanting of the Buddhist monks, who were doubtless chanting sutras that sought to extend mercy to the undeserving? I believe that these things reflect the universal dimension of the Spirit's activity. I was so constrained by my concern for the specific tie with the Word who is Jesus Christ, that I shut myself off from the universal work of the Spirit.

GROUP IV: THEOLOGY: HEALING, SALVATIONS, AND CHRISTOLOGY

I believe that the way we deal with this issue is definitive for how we deal with all the other issues. The bottom line is here.

A THEOLOGICAL DIVIDE

Today there is a huge divide amongst Christians. On one side of the divide are those who see Jesus primarily or only in terms of revelation, and consider Jesus to be in "rough parity"²² with other religious figures and revelations, whether it be Torah, Qur'an, Buddha, Confucius, Krishna or some other—a trend that is unitarian and Arian at base. On the other side are those for whom Jesus Christ is unashamedly Lord and Savior, one in dignity with God—a consistently Trinitarian trend.

Two of the leading figures on each side of this divide are Presbyterian clergy. Both as youth wandered from the faith,

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both as students had an evangelical experience. Eventually both their lives intersected in Birmingham, England. I speak of John Hick and Lesslie Newbigin.

In 1967 Hick was appointed to the H.G.I. Wood chair in the philosophy of religion department at Birmingham University.²³ By this time a large number of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent had settled there—Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, amongst others. Birmingham had become a very pluralist setting racially, culturally and religiously. Newbigin came after retirement in 1973 to teach at Selly Oak Colleges.

Both were profoundly influenced by what they saw. Hick became a leading figure in AFFOR (All Faiths for One Race), which was an ecumenical group seeking ethnic harmony. He was deeply troubled by the ethnic and religious tensions that were all too evident, and the bigotry and intolerance present amongst the native population and the churches. Religion was a required course of study in the school curriculum. He was deeply troubled that Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus also had to take these studies. He was influential in bringing about changes in the curriculum.²⁴ This, amongst other things, led to his writing of *God and the Universe of Faiths*²⁵ in which he put forward his notion of a “Copernican revolution” in theology, a call to turn from Christocentrism, which leads to exclusivism, imperialism and bigotry, to theocentrism which will put all religions on an equal footing.

A number of things struck Newbigin as well. He discovered the paganization of England, with a church that had become timid about the gospel. He too was troubled by the overt racism. He took part in a meeting of AFFOR. He comments on one clergyman there who described missions as

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"theological racism."²⁶ Whether it is so or not, one can be excused for suspecting that person might be John Hick.

He too was troubled by the standard religious curriculum. "[I]t was wrong that the State should use compulsory education to give Christian instruction to the children of Hindu or Muslim homes," he observes.²⁷ But the new syllabus itself had problems. It attempted a strict neutrality and objectivity but in fact in his opinion concealed a particular agenda, "a commitment to the accepted values of the consumer society" in which one more product on the supermarket shelf was a welcome addition. He therefore entered into the critical debate about the syllabus since it was constructed on "altogether false assumptions."²⁸ Later he was to take a parish in a changed neighborhood in Birmingham in a dying church. He found this ministry "much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition." He came to realize that "England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church."²⁹

Here we have two Presbyterian clergy with radically different responses. For Hick it was the religious pluralism together with Christian bigotry that impressed him. For Newbigin it was not only the fact of religious pluralism and local bigotry that impressed him but the low state of Christian faith and the paganization of society. Hick discerned the problem of bigotry to be rooted in Christology; Newbigin discerned the solution to bigotry to be rooted in Christology. Quite different directions indeed.

Where do we Lutherans fit in this fork of the road?

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A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

The theocentrism/Christocentrism debate is a false issue. We cannot separate talk about Jesus and talk about God. If Jesus is theocentric, which he is, then it is equally so that all New Testament talk of God is thoroughly Christocentric. It is an undivided circle.

Jesus is not only a revelation, manifestation or illustration of what God is, but his life, death and resurrection are constitutive of what it is to be God. But not only so, Jesus is constitutive of what it is to be human. Jesus is doubly constitutive. To be constitutive of what it is to be God is the primary subject of Christology; to be constitutive of what it is to be human is the primary subject of soteriology.

In a genuinely Trinitarian theology the cross of Jesus is not simply a timely revelation of God's love that brings about a transformation of consciousness. It is more than epistemology, having a far deeper ontological reach. It is an irreversible time-bound event in the life of God that does not allow of a repetition.³⁰ Any repetition would trivialize this moment in the life of God, either reducing it to metaphor or general truth in place of event, or calling into question its sufficiency as an event. Here God has crossed God's own Rubicon. God is irretrievably bound to us in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

The way the topics are listed in the grouping may suggest that we move from soteriology to Christology. This would be a wrong conclusion I believe. Jesus Christ as the presence of God is not the solution to a problem we already know, but rather the complete redefinition of our human problem. Christology, who Jesus is, is the identity of soteriology; soteriology, what Jesus does, is the functioning of Christology.

Soteriology without Christology is powerless; Christology without soteriology is empty.

This of course leads directly into a theology of the cross. What is a theology of the cross? For me it is a theology that takes its cue from the way God chooses to be God. God chooses to be most fully and completely God by becoming subject to that which is not God, indeed, by becoming subject to those who have made a choice against God. The cross is the eternal mark of such love, the dagger forever embedded in the life of God. Such love, by its very nature, exposes all that is not subject to God as based upon the falsehood of idolatry, of a false love. That which is not truly subject to the one true God in the end brings death and destruction. Yet, in the dealing of death and destruction to God's only Son, a marvelous reversal, a marvelous exchange takes place. The death and destruction we deal out to one another and to God's Son becomes truly his; and the life he gives by becoming subject to us becomes truly ours. And so, in death is life. And Jesus in cross and resurrection is doubly constitutive—of what it is to be God, and what it is to be human. If I understand the gospel at all, it is this gospel that nothing else in all creation, however great the revelation or salvation claimed, can transcend.³¹

A PROVIDENTIAL ROLE FOR RELIGIONS?

These are the grounding assumptions with which I enter into the interfaith exchange at a theological level. How do other religions get at the basic human problematic? Is it a different problematic they discern? What significance then does that have? Is there a providential role that other religions might in fact play?

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I believe there is. I will suggest four reasons why I believe so. The first reason is the most obvious. One need only look across and through history to see the positive role that the religions have played in providing a meaningful and ordered life for vast reaches of humanity. We cannot but help instinctively admiring much of what has been accomplished through the religions for the sake of humanity. Is God's Spirit unrelated to this? Hardly. We have touched on that.

The above is granted readily. But what about when the religions differ with us in a fundamental and principled way? Can we speak of providence in that regard? I think so. There may be a providential role because of the reality of sin. For us this lesson is above all learned through the history of Christianity and Judaism. Other religious communities in their own insidencies stand as a permanent barrier against Christian arrogance and narrowness, and serve also as in the case of Judaism to expose the dark underside of Christian history. Without Israel's rejection of the Messiah, their own dark underside, the eventual exposure of Christian darkness might not have taken place so clearly. It is a reminder that "every mouth" is to be stopped and "the whole world . . . held accountable to God,"³² not least the Christian world.

Another reason is the reality of human finitude. The insistence of other communities, insidencies that we can sometimes partially share, are a reminder that maybe, in our interpretation of the gospel we have not yet taken account of all that we should. Indeed, it may be the ways in which others are different from us rather than most like us that may be the most important. The pervading work of the Spirit throughout history may have been far richer than we have

imagined, and other cultures and religions have more to contribute than we have yet been able to acknowledge.

There is, once again, no reason why we should discount the possibility that other religions also may have an eschatological role to play. We do not know now how multi-dimensional God's final rule shall be. This need not discount the eschatological role of the risen Lord, at whose name all knees shall bow,³³ or the eschatological hope of Paul that "all Israel will be saved."³⁴ And none of this discounts the historical mission of the church to proclaim the gospel so that even now a remnant of Israel, "if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in."³⁵ There is an ultimate hiddenness in the way God works for our salvation,³⁶ a hiddenness that is a call to renewed faithfulness to the gospel, for at the heart of that hiddenness, Christians believe, is the gospel.³⁷

Is Jesus a problem in our relation to people of other religions? No. The church is the problem, not Jesus. Yes, for Jesus too is a problem. Jesus is a problem for Christians as well. It is always the case that "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified."³⁸ Christians stand on no different ground than other people before the crucified. Is it then the case that proclaiming the lordship of the crucified³⁹ necessarily leads to Christian imperialism, as some maintain?⁴⁰ Lochhead has made the important point that there is no direct relation between Christological statements and statements about the world. The connection is always analogical. That is to say, the relation of the church to the world is based analogically on the way God is related to the world as disclosed in Jesus. Whenever Christology becomes the basis for self-assertion, whether it be of the individual, the church, or a civilization, analogy has been

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replaced by ideology. The cross has been transformed into an event that serves the interests of the one making use of it. But a genuine theology of the cross is destructive of all such logic. To use is to abuse. It can only be responded to in repentance and faith, issuing in love.⁴¹

GROUP V: WITNESS, MISSION, METHOD

If I were to sum up what has been said hitherto I think it can best be done by pointing to three conditions that must be met for there to be a satisfactory Christian practice of relating to people of other religions and world views. These three are: (a) a sustained affirmation of the universal efficacy of God's saving relationship with us and all people in Jesus Christ; (b) a recognition of the integrity of other religions as they define their own aims and the pattern of life that corresponds to that aim; (c) a discernment of a common space that makes possible an in-depth relationship between the Christian and the neighbor of another commitment. If these things are achieved, then the imperative of the gospel for mission and evangelism will remain central, the requirement of respect and honor accorded to the other will be assured, and the excitement of mutual understanding and change will become a possibility.

In this section the primary concern is with the pragmatics of interfaith relationships. How, for instance, is point "c" above to be implemented? Of course our life together is the most common space of all. If we truly meet, it is here we meet, as we have already said.

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We meet our neighbor without preconditions.⁴² The only condition necessary is that each be willing to relate with the other. Where even that minimal requirement is not met, we cannot as Christians forsake our neighbor. The situation may require that we even take a risk upon ourselves in order that a relationship can be established. Without preconditions does not mean that we insist the neighbor must have no preconditions. That is the neighbor's own decision. Indeed, there may be situations in which Christians have in the past made themselves unwelcome, giving rise to suspicion and distrust. For these reasons and others the neighbor might not want a relationship with the Christian without preconditions. The only limitation for the Christian is that any preconditions accepted do not violate fundamental commitments.

Whether the relationship be friendship, or something short of that, there are many ways in which we may relate to each other as people of differing religious commitments. The least demanding form of relationship is simply the gathering and exchange of information, just getting to know our neighbor. But even this can be a very delicate affair, and requires varied levels of mutual trust and cooperation. A more demanding form of relationship is the mutual quest for understanding. Without empathy this understanding cannot be attained.⁴³ A necessary form of relationship in our day is that of common action for the common good. This can be action on the local level all the way up to international cooperation as in NGOs (non-governmental organizations). The most demanding form of relationship is that in which there is a genuine sharing of the deepest convictions with each other. This is the highest form that a relationship of friendship can take. It is rare.

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There are few general rules that can govern all these possibilities. Each local context presents its own demands. The relationship between people of these two faiths might take a very different character from that between those two faiths. In any case, however, an essential goal is that there be full mutuality. We are all witnesses to the commitments that animate us. As witnesses we seek to make a convincing witness, whether in word or in deed. It is equally required if the relationship is one of friendship that each also heed a convincing witness. All of this means that in the end none will remain unchanged, whether that change be a big conversion (a shifting of religious allegiance) or a little conversion (a fresh appropriation of one's own faith and a renewed appreciation of the other), and we can all become creative agents of change for the good in our shared world. None of these considerations should ignore the fact that all religions and cultures have their dark underside. Part of the task of mutuality is to discern these dark undersides and render them harmless. Can we bear the critique?

It should not be imagined that dialogue or cooperation and evangelism are inherently at odds. Indeed, to be a representative of a faith is to be a witness. Evangelism and dialogue are two modes of being a witness. If evangelism is a public offer (for the Christian that is the offer of the gospel), then dialogue is a public reasoning whether in voice or action. These two modes are interdependent, and always move back and forth where genuine religious conviction animates one's speech and one's life.

GROUP VI: IDENTITY AND ENRICHMENT FROM THE RELIGIONS

Above I spoke of big and little conversions. Here we are thinking about the little conversions, the many little or not so little changes that come about because of our meeting with people of other faiths. Perhaps we appropriate our own faith in a new way; perhaps we appreciate those of other faiths in a new way. Perhaps as good a way as any to introduce this theme is to share briefly some of my own little conversions that have resulted through the encounter with other faiths.

The two religious traditions that have influenced me the most up to this time except, perhaps, for Confucianism, are Islam and Buddhism. This is so in part because I have regularly introduced theological students, however briefly, to each of these. As I have put it to my students, Buddhism finally raises the question of "Why God?" for the Christian; Islam finally raises the question of "Why Jesus?" Neither question is easy to answer, but if answered one has gotten to the core of one's own faith, which for me is a renewed reflection on the meaning of Trinity.

In the case of Islam I am deeply appreciative of its sense of the majesty and sovereignty of God. With this goes a deep appreciation for the created world, and a sense of awe and responsibility within it. God is God, and we let God be God.

This has laid the groundwork for my reflection on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in the light of Islam. We know God's nature, not just God's will. But what does that mean? For Islam it is God in God's sovereignty that makes us call God "most great." But because of Jesus I discern the "most great" to lie elsewhere. God is vulnerable deity. God

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is "most great" in God's freedom, God's willed freedom, to be bound. This is what creation means—God will and therefore can not be as if God had not created; this is what covenant means—God freely chooses to be obligated; this is what cross means—God becomes freely vulnerable to us, for God is love and there is no such thing as invulnerable love. Islam has driven me to a deeper appreciation of the pathos, the suffering of God. Without Islam would I have been so enriched here?

Buddhism poses a very different set of issues for me. What most impresses me about Buddhism is the deep sense of the interdependency of all things. It is, I believe, a profoundly true statement on the nature of finitude. Everything that exists is so because it is infinitely conditioned. Their contents are what the conditions make possible. The destiny of each finite thing is to become transparent to these conditions, giving up any form of self-assertion over against them. This is a stirring truth for me.

But what does it occasion for me in the renewed understanding of my faith? If Islam discerns sovereignty, but not vulnerability in God, then Buddhism discerns the mutual interdependence of all things without a real other. Buddhism has forced me to reconsider the nature of relatedness. To follow this through would be a detailed discussion. Just briefly then. To be related requires both sameness and difference. In Buddhism there is a great deal of sameness—we are all conditioned by the infinite—but little difference—we reflect this conditionedness from specific loci of time and space, that is all. For relationship to be real there is need for a greater difference, a greater otherness. Just on the human plane, we are each loci of freedom. No one can be reducible to the other. I cannot replace your freedom with mine.

There is an unbridgeable ontological gap between your freedom and mine. The only way I can know you in your freedom is for you to reveal yourself to me, to speak, to share. Because we are genuinely other to each other in some kind of irreducible way, we can experience real relationship. For the Christian it is impossible to get behind such relatedness in otherness to something more primordial, more transparent on either the human or the divine/human plane. The other is always mystery, always inaccessible, until it reveals.

And so the Christian speaks of creation. That is God is not only the origin of the world, but is the infinite Other to the world. The world cannot be reduced to God, nor God to the world. Similarly, when Christians speak of God, they are not unitarians, but affirm Trinity, the ultimate internal relatedness of God behind which not even God will get, for God is love. God is the infinitely related, and only God has experienced infinite otherness—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁴⁴

Let me say a brief word about Hinduism and Confucianism. In my encounter with Hinduism I have grown to a fresh appreciation of images. By instinct, for some reason, I am more Muslim than Hindu here, having an iconoclastic streak. Yet, as the Orthodox iconoclasm controversy showed, images are valuable because images are concrete. It is in this concreteness that theistic Hindus delight. Hindus go to the temples to stand in the presence of God and to be seen by God, for God is palpably present in the image. God has taken on, so to speak, the flesh of images. Thus, Pillai Lokacarya, a theologian of the Sri Vaisnava movement, writes in a way that almost sounds like Luther, who rhapsodizes on the humble babe of Bethlehem:

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This is the greatest grace of the Lord, that being free He becomes bound, being independent He becomes dependent for all His service on His devotee . . . In other forms the man belonged to God but behold the supreme sacrifice of Isvara, here the Almighty becomes the property of the devotee . . . He carries Him about, fans Him, feeds Him, plays with Him—yea, the Infinite has become finite, that the child soul may grasp, understand and love Him.⁴⁵

Idolatry, as Koyama has said,⁴⁶ is in the mind, not in the object. For me there is something other than idolatry being expressed in that moving passage above. Yet, the image which cannot see or speak or act, regardless of the intensity of human devotion, is not God's earthly counterpart. It has given me a fresh appreciation of what it means that we are created "in the image of God," and why it is that God is located, not finally in temple, not finally in image, not finally even in Word, but in the personal realm where full relationship alone is possible. The Old Testament proscription of images was doubtless intended to protect the personal, relational character of God.⁴⁷

I have already by illustration referred to the Confucian tradition and the role of ancestors. In a way I believe it is the Confucian tradition that has most deeply shaped me inwardly. For I partly grew up in China, and in that growing up inculcated something of the ethos of filial piety. Indeed, it is hard for me to tell where the Christian and where the Confucian ingredients of that ethos taper off. In the Confucian tradition great value is placed in gratitude to parents for the sheer fact that they are the source of one's life and that parenthood is fulfilled in nurturing that new life.

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Perhaps it is in part for this reason that my own experience of coming to adult faith is intimately linked with my experience of my parents as the earthly exemplar of what it is for God to be the source and nurturer of life. The sense here is far more deeply emotive than intellectual. I believe something is owed here to the Confucian tradition.

TOWARDS WHAT FUTURE?

Let us suppose that our congregations receive greater courage to engage in relationship with their neighbors of another religious commitment because of our work. What then? Well, I think two matters will have to be dealt with. The first is pastoral. Relations are delicate, and all sorts of pastoral guidance is necessary for our churches in these matters. How will that pastoral guidance be given? Our future will have to address this.

The second is theological. I think our work has hardly begun to scratch the surface of this. Overall, the church cannot afford to leave the theological wrestling on primary religious questions to the secular scholars or theologians without confessional commitment, but must address the questions, the challenges, the new possibilities that the other religions call forth on the terms of our own confession. This will require serious theological work. Can the Lutheran church provide any serious spade work here, or shall it be left by default to others?

What I have attempted in this paper is to share some of the theological assumptions that would guide me in coming to

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terms with both pastoral and theological issues. This, I believe is the minimal task we are asked to do. Hopefully we can achieve it. But that is only the first step into our future.

NOTES

- ¹ LW:vol 31, p. 344.
- ² LW:vol 31, p. 371.
- ³ Luke 10:37.
- ⁴ John 1:18.
- ⁵ John 1:18.
- ⁶ Genesis 1:2
- ⁷ Exodus 35:30-35. Cf. for example Proverbs 8.
- ⁸ II Corinthians 2:10-11.
- ⁹ Romans 8:19-23.
- ¹⁰ I Corinthians 12:4ff.
- ¹¹ Romans 8:26-27.
- ¹² I Corinthians 12:3.
- ¹³ Acts 2:4.
- ¹⁴ I Corinthians 12:10.
- ¹⁵ John 3:8.
- ¹⁶ Genesis 2:7.
- ¹⁷ II Corinthians 2:18.
- ¹⁸ Cf. for instance Acts 17:28.
- ¹⁹ John 16:13.
- ²⁰ John 1:1-18.

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- 21 John 14:6.
- 22 A word taken from Gilkey in "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Hick & Knitter, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987):37.
- 23 See Brian Stetson, *Pluralism and Particularity in Religious Belief* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994):8f.
- 24 See Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (NY: St Martin's Press, 1985):9-10.
- 25 1973.
- 26 p. 244.
- 27 p. 244.
- 28 p. 245.
- 29 p. 249
- 30 The book of Hebrews is most explicit on this point. See for example chapter 10 as a whole, and particularly 10:18. Cf. also 6:6.
- 31 Cf. Romans 8:31-39.
- 32 Romans 3:19.
- 33 Philippians 2:10-11.
- 34 Romans 11:26.
- 35 Romans 11:23.
- 36 Romans 11:31-35.
- 37 For some creative thoughts on the providential role of other religions see [DiNoia 1992], who is really the first to broach this issue with some clarity. For a much more elaborate proposal see [Heim 1995; see note 42]. The title "Salvations" gives an indication of his argument. While I find agreement with the general argument of the book, I find its weakness to be that it is almost entirely formal, and it is hard to know how in fact a material argument might develop.
- 38 I Corinthians 1:22-23.
- 39 Philippians 2:5-11.
- 40 This is a major thesis in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), edited by Hick and Knitter.
- 41 For Lochhead's argument see his *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1988):94-97.

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- 42 This also applies to those who are in quest of a "new universalism" which can presumably umpire the dialogue inherent in religious pluralism. One such example is David J. Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991). This is a carefully argued book but, in my opinion, does not deliver on its promise. A value of the book is that it points to the genuine reality of "other-rationality," and the way it reflects on Wittgenstein's work. But in the end, the diatropical hermeneutics he proposes, developed out of Raimundo Panikkar with, it seems to me, his teacher W. C. Smith's ideas in the background, simply proposes another supposedly neutral ground as the basis for dialogue. This ground is the ontology of faith that he discerns in Panikkar. In a passage that sounds much like Rahner's transcendental anthropology Panikkar writes:

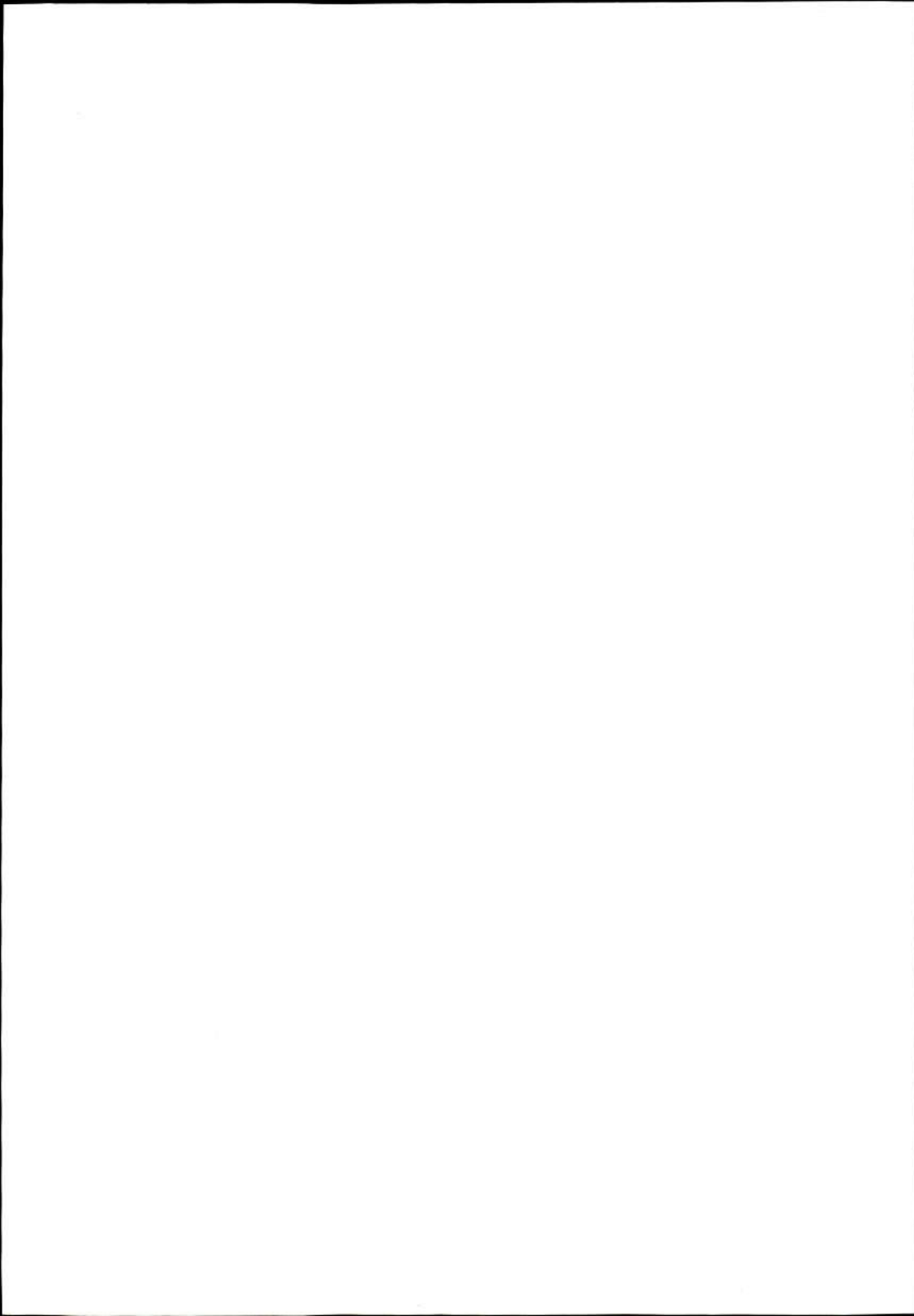
"We could describe faith as *existential openness toward transcendence* or, if this seems too loaded, more simply as *existential openness*. This openness implies a bottomless capacity to be filled without closing. Were it to close, it would cease to be faith. The openness is always to a *plus ultra*, to an ever farther, which we may call transcendence and in a certain sense transcendental." (Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* [New York: Paulist Press, 1979]:207f.)

This "faith" of course is not naked, so to speak, but always requires a belief to be activated as it were, but it is the "faith" itself that is what Krieger calls "saving faith," (Krieger, p. 61) a faith that has many possible objects. The condition for it to be saving is that it keep one open to the surplus of reality. As with W.C. Smith, not to mention Hick, this tends to collapse the *fides quae* into the *fides qua*. Not that in which one believes saves, but the believing, the being open to transcendence, itself saves. For Luther, in contrast, faith or *fides qua* is essentially trust, a relational or eschatological reality not ontological (a human quality or disposition inherent in our nature), and is not in itself saving, for the saving derives from that in which one has trusted, the *fides quae*. The key words are not faith/beliefs *à la* W.C. Smith, but trust/in. It is the "in" of faith that saves. Cf. Luther, "The Large Catechism," under the "first commandment" [Tappert 1959:365]. As for the business about anthropological openness, one need not deny that it is part of what it means that we are created in God's image. But redemption cannot be collapsed into creation. The problem then with Krieger's proposal concerning a universal disclosive discourse is that it requires a particular ontology. That simply makes it another position, hardly different in essence from argumentation (Habermas) or hermeneutics

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(Gadamer). S. Mark Heim in *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995) is the most recent contribution I have read that finally does take difference seriously, as the "s" in the title indicates. He notes Krieger's work without really critiquing it, yet chooses to use the philosophical construction of Rescher as a basis for his argumentation, saying it gives greater room for movement than Krieger. I suspect that the problem I have identified is at least part of the reason, perhaps implicit on Heim's part, that he cannot build his argument on Krieger's work. Because of the above reason he simply couldn't do so. The "orientational pluralism" of Rescher has the merit that it acknowledges that there is no non-orientational position, and yet that does not preclude but makes possible the conversation. Krieger's analysis of Wittgenstein's late understanding of language games could have been better used to interpret this kind of a thesis it would seem.

- 43 An excellent example of this level of relationship is the recent book by Roland Miller, *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling*, An Introduction to Islam (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1996).
- 44 Mark 15:34.
- 45 Bharatan Kumarappa, *The Hindu Conception of the Deity as Culminating in Ramanuja* (London: Luzac and Company, 1934), 316-317, cited in Diana L. Eck, *Darsan* (n.p., n.d.):35.
- 46 In his *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984).
- 47 Terry Fretheim puts it this way: "The use of interpersonal language is also related to the prohibition of concrete images in Israel's worship. Though the Old Testament does not clearly articulate the reasons for this prohibition, it points more in the direction of a concern to protect God's relatedness than anything else. God is not present in the world in the form of an image which cannot see or speak or act." In "The Color of God: Israel's God-Talk and Life Experience" (n.p., n.d.):265.



REPORT OF GROUP I

HISTORICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL, CONTEXTUAL THEMES

As soon as the group began its deliberations, we realized that whatever *general* statements we made, they would have to be complemented by *particular* references to the various contexts,

- depending on geographical, historical, and political situations,
- depending on the particular religious traditions with which one is dealing,
- depending on the specific experiences of one's church community, etc.

That is the inevitable result of a contextual approach. The generalizations and rough approximations of this report must, therefore, be taken with due consideration of their limitation.

How can the Christian understanding of forgiveness be applied to the mutual apprehension between religions?

With forgiveness as a central theme of the Christian faith it is natural to approach other faiths with a penitent mind, asking to forgive past atrocities, if such sins have been committed. In many actual struggles the only starting point

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for reconciliation seems to be forgiveness of past atrocities. The problem is often how to involve both parties in this process.

It is difficult to speak faithfully and sincerely about others, but sometimes even more difficult to be faithful when we speak about ourselves and our own inherited history of faith. Belonging to a community of faith, we not only represent ourselves as individuals, but are part of a greater connection. In dialogue with other faiths we have to be aware of that historical solidarity and be present to the other with the weaknesses and strengths of our tradition. Thus humility and willingness to acknowledge the sins of the past and the present are important attitudes in our encounter with other faiths, but should not lead to self-abasement or one-sided preoccupation with guilt, as is the case for many Christians.

Often the willingness of Christians to speak about their historical guilt, for instance in relation to Islam, is not met with a corresponding willingness on the part of the other and thus the dynamic of reconciliation does not seem to work.

In such cases, rather than starting with penitence, the entire dialogue might be an exercise in developing mutual trust, a process in which openness and frankness may help both parties to see and to speak faithfully not only about the other's but about their own traditions. In such a process mutual reconciliation may be an outcome, not a starting point.

Some members of the group were quite critical of the tendency to indulge in guilt and confession of sins. Do we have (the right) to confess the sins of our fathers? The preoccupation with guilt may easily become a self-centered debasement that neither liberates ourselves nor the other.

Others emphasized that confession of such sins has a therapeutic and preventive value, being a reminder to our own community and a pledge that, whatever happens, such atrocities shall never be committed in the future.

The group was also reminded that forgiveness/reconciliation is a key term in Christian/Abrahamic traditions, while other religions might prefer other terms to express similar concerns, such as compassion, friendliness, humaneness, sincerity, harmony, etc.

What are the factors that have contributed to the contemporary revivals of the religions and people finding meaning in them?

Religious revivals may be caused by internal and external factors, often in combination. Each religion seems to have potential for revival or internal transformation by mobilizing, renewing, and reinterpreting its original vision. At the same time external factors often play an important part in that revitalization, such as a threat, a shock, or a positive stimulation or challenge.

As for the renewal of religions in Asia (and Africa), the missionary expansion of Christianity created a variety of responses, from initial shock and paralysis to active protest, reform, and revitalization. In similar ways, colonial expansion and Westernizing trends created shock waves that eventually led to struggle against Western dominance, to the renewal and revival of national and religious sentiments.

Christianity not only provoked negative reactions, but also offered inspiration and positive models for renewal. Renewal movements often adopted strategies learned from the churches, such as methods of propagation, holding meetings,

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creating Sunday schools, youth programs, educational and social institutions, and launching public campaigns, etc.

Reactions to the "threats of the modern world" have also mobilized religions to act as a bulwark against the forces of modernization, secularization, Westernization, etc.

On the other hand, modern scholarship, science and technology have also stimulated renewal. While religious authority earlier was in the hands of the learned, or enlightened, or privileged few, academic scholarship has created new types of knowledge and authority, often critically viewing traditional authority. Mass communication, books and journals, films, audio- and videotapes have made esoteric knowledge available to the masses. In India, for instance, rituals, mantras, religious music, yogic instructions are available in this way. Likewise, in the West occult traditions have spread through publications and mass movements. Such "democratization" of religious authority and knowledge is a vital aspect of the new religious movements.

Other types of revival are inspired by numerous charismatic leaders, both in the East and the West, mobilizing vast numbers of people in new types of movements.

What is the image of Christianity among the people of other faiths, and what do we do about improving it?

There is a great variety of images of Christianity, some positive, some predominantly negative. One dominant feature is the image of Christianity as a Western religion in non-Western cultures. At the present time, this serves as a negative factor. Christ is regarded as alien, a foreign element, associated with colonialism, Western domination and

dependency, and inherently incompatible with indigenous traditions and religions.

The negative evaluation of Christianity as a foreign element is strengthened by the impression that missionaries and churches generally tended to depreciate indigenous traditions and warn against inherited practices.

On the other hand, the attraction of Christianity in many cases was due to the fact that it represented an alternative, a radically new faith and practice that had liberating and progressive powers. In some contexts that is the sentiment again, for instance in China and Korea, where many now regard Christianity as representing modernity and progress, and as a much needed alternative to an ideology that has become stifled.

How does the dynamic of change within the religions, including our own, affect our theology of religions?

The most important factor affecting our theology of religions seems to be the realization that Christianity is one religion among others. Particularly in the West, the churches are finally beginning to realize that the other religions are there, not as exotic existences in distant countries, but as neighbors and fellow citizens.

The presence of other religions poses a variety of challenges, depending on contexts and situations. The few remarks here are basically related to the new situation in Western contexts.

The presence of minority immigrant communities, some of them under pressure as victims of prejudice, suffering from unemployment, uprootedness, poverty, social problems,

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etc., challenges Christians to develop a new understanding of hospitality, generosity, neighborliness, solidarity, justice, charity . . . The fact that Christians encounter other faiths in society—in schools, hospitals, and other institutions and contexts—creates a demand for knowledge of other faiths and for practical solutions to deal with the needs of these religions in these contexts.

The presence of religious alternatives urges Christians to keep rethinking their own faith. They begin to ask how other faiths relate to their own commitments. There is a demand for guidance at the congregational level on how to relate theologically to other faiths. The academic theologies of religion must be transformed and brought to the level of the congregations, so as to offer viable solutions to complicated questions.

The presence of other faiths and the very fact that Christians more and more live in multireligious and multicultural contexts create a growing conviction that the era of aggressive evangelism and triumphalism is over. People know that Christianity is not going to “conquer” the world and they need help to face this fact in a meaningful way. Christian churches need to find ways in which openness, tolerance, and generosity towards representatives of other faiths in a natural way go along with confidence, commitment and concern for sharing their faith with others.

These notes are only tentative and fragmentary responses to complicated issues and in no way pretend to be comprehensive or representative.

REPORT OF GROUP II

SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL THEMES

What is the living context within which we meet our neighbor, and within which our theology develops?

As a group we wrestled with this question, and our individual responses more or less coincided. People in most countries are living under multiple identities. These may be broadly categorized as ethnic, linguistic, gender, cultural, and religious identities. However, within these larger categories, there may be any number of sub-classifications. Depending on the occasion and the place, one or more of these identities may come to the fore, yet never completely obliterating the others. For example, at a place of worship a common identity as a religious community may be accentuated, whereas in a neighborhood the common identity of language or ethnicity may define a person or group.

We are also aware that there are a few countries more homogeneous and less pluralistic than others.

By and large, we observe that we are constantly encountering our neighbors with a plurality of identities, in educational institutions, places of worship, places where we work, or places where we spend our leisure time. Some of these identities we share while others we do not.

All of us want to live peacefully, with meaningful employment, in comfortable homes and in a clean environment. While this

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is the reality for some, it is for many still a distant dream. Economics seem to play an important role in whether an individual or a community feels fulfilled or neglected.

It is within these contextual realities that we are asked to develop our theologies.

What do we have in common in our life with people of other faiths? What is the basis of our cooperation in dealing with common human problems?

Living side by side with people of other faiths has become a common experience in almost all countries and communities. While some have long lived with this reality, for others this is a new experience.

As we live together as people with a diversity of faiths, we are discovering that we have much to share. There may be occasions for joyous celebrations with them, and other occasions for solidarity in times of trouble. Whatever the reason, we allow ourselves to enter into experiences with our neighbors without hesitation or reserve. The most meaningful celebrations may be the rites of passage and religious festivals. These are opportunities for learning and sharing and thereby establishing mutual trust and building bridges for understanding. Life is a gift from God. It must be nurtured and protected with care and compassion.

The basis of good cooperation is to cultivate genuine concern for others and to enter their experiences with empathy. This perhaps is as an extension of the golden rule which says "do not do unto others as you would not want others to do unto you."

What is the role of religion in the midst of economic deprivation and transformation?

We believe that economic deprivation leads to serious social consequences such as unrest, violence, and loss of human dignity. Women and children make up the majority of victims of this situation.

Deprivation is often the result of deep systemic social and political problems. A colonial past and continuing economic mismanagement may also have contributed to this process.

The role of religion in this process is somewhat ambiguous. We recognize the liberative potential religion has in providing the moral critique for amelioration and transformation. At certain times in human history this was possible. However, religion has also contributed to maintaining the status quo, failing to voice protest and to denounce injustice. This factor may have furthered deprivation. We also believe that religion has a role to play in ministering to the victims of privations, not as an opiate, but by providing hope for transformation. We are aware that rather than contributing to the harmony of a society religions may also sow the seeds of discord.

In some parts of the world an increase in religious fervor and revival also resulted in economic transformation. We are not quite sure of the actual dynamics that went into that process but this is one area which warrants more research.

We also recognize that religious traditions have the potential to inspire one another to be sensitive to the contemporary challenges our society faces with regard to the problems of ecology and the empowerment of the marginalized.

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What space do religions give to women and the transformation of their roles?

In some societies religions provide the impetus for change in the status and role of women; marked by ignorance and superstition, they have been largely responsible for keeping women in positions of bondage in others.

Economic improvement may have contributed to the rise in status of women in some societies. Nevertheless, the overwhelming feeling is that religions generally played a negative role in most societies by ascribing a low status to women.

We also believe that religion has a crucial role to play in the transformation of the status and role of women in our societies and countries.

REPORT OF GROUP III

THEOLOGY: CREATION, REVELATION

How the concept of creation is viewed in various religious traditions

Creation has nothing to do with Buddhism, for which the universe has neither beginning nor end. Christians and Muslims share the view of creation and of a creator to whom human beings are to submit themselves. African Religion also views God as creator in a variety of ways. Hindus as well know the concept of creation. So, at the popular level it can be a bridge rather than a barrier. But creation as emanation or expansion is different from *creatio ex nihilo* in a biblical sense, although Hinduism also draws a sharp line between the divine and the human, because of sin.

Gratitude as the fundamental virtue

In spite of the differences among the religions regarding the notion of creation and creator, they share the attitude of giving thanks for life, family, and environment to some kind of superior being. It may be to God or gods, to ancestor or nature. The point is that no one is self-sustaining. The sense of relatedness, or even indebtedness to the other is essential. Also the biblical account of creation is an expression of humanity's total dependence on and gratitude to God.

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With regard to Islam, it is interesting to note that the antonym of the Arabic word for gratitude *shukte* is *kofte*, which also means "unbelief."

Moral responsibility

The theology of creation paves the way for all people on earth to meet and share the common concern for life regardless of religious conviction, especially of the understanding of salvation. People are concerned with questions of life and death, the well-being of the family and the community, local and global, and the protection of the environment. This is true not only for those who commit themselves to the Creator but also for those who do not have faith but recognize themselves as being part of nature.

The AIDS epidemic is a typical example of people of many religions endeavoring to help the suffering. Whether to terminate or prolong human life with the help of modern medicine is now being debated as an ethical issue; it can be considered as a human interference with God's will or nature.

Co-creator

Recent Christian theology affirms the idea of the human being as "co-creator," which is a reflection on how to understand the increased human responsibility in the realm of creation. To be more accurate, it would be better to use the expression "created co-creator," which enables us to see human beings as more positive and more responsible partners of creation while maintaining a view of them as creatures. A classical theological concept, *imago dei*, can be introduced here. As

God is creator, so the human being, as the image of God, has a creative power. Whether or not people of other faiths accept this notion, it does encourage Christians to take an active role in the creation where all human beings live, rejoice and suffer.

The Spirit

We, as Christians, acknowledge two complementary dimensions of the Spirit—its universal activity and its specific tie with the Word, as Dr Martinson said. This inevitably leads us to admit that the Spirit is working even in religions other than Christianity, for it is active in all races and cultures, in short, in God's creation.

As the Spirit means the presence of God's power in creation, we can reaffirm a traditional concept of *creatio continua*, continuing creation.

It is also noted that it cannot be easily accepted if one says without any reservation that the Spirit is present and active in every sphere where human beings live. If we do not have any qualification in this regard, we are afraid we will be left in mere religious relativism.

Criterion to discern the work of the Spirit, or the authority

The biblical passage which serves as a criterion for the Spirit in the situation where human life is being threatened is this: "... that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10) and Jesus' proclamation for liberation in Luke 4.

In other words, the criterion must be the death and life of Jesus Christ. In our Christian, especially Lutheran, tradition, the redemptive grace of the cross and resurrection has been

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emphasized with an overwhelming weight, but the life of Jesus should be appreciated in a new light so that our understanding of God's mission may be balanced between the order of salvation and the order of creation. In other words, both saving acts and sustaining acts of God should be recognized in this world. In this sense a Lutheran concept of "law and gospel" should be reexamined.

Importance of the theology of religions

We affirm that this difficult project is very necessary not only to promote the well-being of humanity, for which all religions share responsibility, but also to recognize our Christian faith and ministry in a much wider perspective, namely, in a hope for the completion of God's salvation.

REPORT OF GROUP IV

CHRISTOLOGY, HEALING AND SALVATION

For Christians, Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and the human, related to the created world. In our humanity, in our thirst for the divine, in our dependency on creation we relate to him. We are also like him. The event of transfiguration provides the model. God opened the eyes of the disciples so that they could see Jesus in his humanity being transfigured by his divine nature. God became human so that we could reach divinity. The radiance at Jesus' transfiguration shows us our true nature, given at our baptism when we died with Jesus and were resurrected with him.

Our understanding of Jesus Christ is based on the scriptures and their interpretation in the Christian community throughout the ages. At the heart of our common Christian tradition lies the mystery that Jesus, the Palestinian Jew, is also God's decisive bond with humanity, Godself limited by human conditions. Christians experience God's care and compassion, God's power and glory as related to Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

How are we to communicate this conviction with integrity, without triumphalism and without timidity? In various attempts to formulate theologies of religion several strategies have been tried in order to deal with the question of how to understand Jesus Christ in relation to the religious traditions of the world. Two of these strategies have to be

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avoided: one which promotes Jesus at the expense of Christ, focusing solely on Jesus as teacher, example and witness of God's presence in the world; the other promoting Christ at the expense of Jesus, seeing Christ as the eternal Word of God, the meeting point between the divine and human which Christians call Christ, but which may have other names in other faith traditions.

During the last decades we have learnt that all theology is contextual theology. This is no less the case when it comes to understanding the meaning and function of Jesus Christ in relation to other faith traditions. The core of the gospel is not compromised when the Jesus Christ who emerges in the encounter with Brahmin scholars has partly different features from the Jesus Christ who is meaningful in the encounter with Indian tribals. Different approaches to and interpretations of Jesus Christ are given already in the Christian scriptures.

As our discussion moved on, the participants gave examples of how, in the encounter with other faith traditions, Jesus Christ's person and work was communicated in a meaningful way. These examples can be subsumed under the heading "inductive Christology."

An inductive Christology, based on experiences of the living Lord, informed by the scriptures and our common tradition may be a constructive way to deal with the question of Jesus Christ in interreligious dialogue. Christians who have experienced Christ's power over the powers of destruction should not hesitate to tell their stories about the power of compassion that Christ has brought about. When Jesus Christ is seen not as an abstract principle or a problem to be dealt with, but as the living Lord, present in the midst

of the community, then he need no longer be an obstacle to dialogue. However, experiences of Christ alive in the community should not be used arrogantly to prove the superiority of Christianity over other traditions, as if dialogue were a competition between different faith experiences. Authentic experiences of Christ, told in a humble way, must complement, or rather, precede doctrinal statements about Christ, if these are not to be dead letters.

Jesus Christ as God's vulnerability

When encountering people from other faith traditions, we have found two ways of talking about Jesus Christ, which are faithful to our common Christian tradition and at the same time open to insights from other faith traditions. One is the image of Jesus Christ as God's vulnerability. In Jesus Christ we encounter God as the most vulnerable one among us, the unprotected God. This image is not unknown in other traditions, but in Christian theological reflection and spirituality it has been prominent.

Other religious traditions also have the insight that power is not the same as a violent attitude. When we speak of Jesus Christ as God's vulnerability we do not mean a God who has renounced all power, because such a God would have ceased to be God. And this is not what we see in Jesus Christ. In him God's power is shown to be the power of compassion. Our concepts of power as violence and suppression are thus changed, and we see that the strongest power is the power of love and compassion.

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Jesus Christ as God's power of compassion

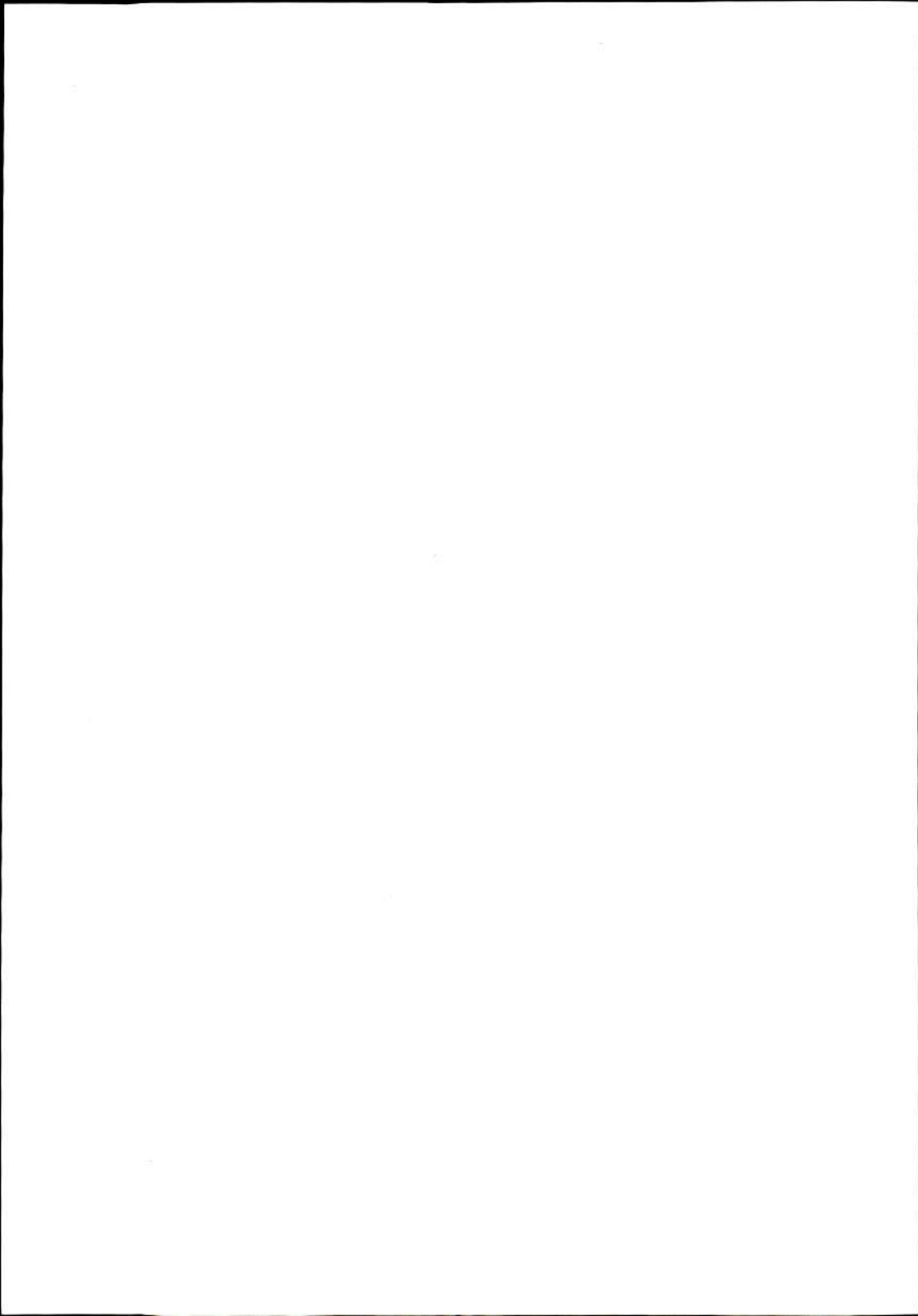
God's power of compassion can be experienced and witnessed. It is vital that we base our talk about God's power of compassion on lived experiences. However, the power of compassion is not a Christian monopoly. Other faith traditions hold compassion in very high regard. For Christians the conviction that Jesus Christ is God's power of compassion implies that compassion is closely connected with suffering for others. But Jesus Christ as God's power of compassion also shows that suffering is not the final aim, that the meaning of compassion and suffering is life, and life in abundance.

Healing and salvation, salvation as healing

Talk about salvation can easily be very abstract and far from experiences in daily life. We are not asking the question whether other religious traditions can bring about salvation, or what "salvation" could possibly mean in various religious contexts. Our question is more fundamental: are there experiences which communicate what Christians mean when they speak of salvation, experiences which are accessible also for followers of other faith traditions? It was suggested that the experience of healing is such an example. Many traditions give healing of diseases a prominent place in their religious life. The Christian community may also be a place where healing, not only of diseases but also of broken relationships, is brought about. It is what Christians call forgiveness: healing the wounds of sin, restoration from shame to full acceptance. This relation of healing and salvation finds its most prominent place in the Eucharist. In this celebration the healing of broken relationships in the

community, also those which have been broken by death, is brought about. Here, salvation is both tasted and shared.

Christians should not deny or denigrate the fact that healing takes place also in other faith communities. Rather, we should rejoice to see that the salvific work of Jesus Christ, of which healing and forgiveness are manifestations, spans the whole creation.



REPORT OF GROUP V

WITNESS, MISSION, METHOD

As a group, we had the choice of how to proceed. Our approach was that of responding to Prof. Paul Martinson's paper which provided specific materials for group V. In this response, we bring forth our point of view on certain points.

In the first paragraph of his paper, Paul Martinson suggests that there are three conditions for a satisfactory Christian practice of relating to other faiths. Our group spent considerable time discussing these. We agree with point (a) regarding the universal efficacy of God's saving relationship with us and all people in Jesus Christ. Point (b) refers to the recognition of the integrity of other religions as they define their aims. We understand the word integrity to include the following:

- the validity of God's working in other religious people, under the principle of general revelation;
- the validity of moral commitment to whatever things are good and beautiful and true, wherever that may be found; and

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- the ability to have one's own perspective on an issue and idea, and to regard it as preferable, and to articulate it within one's own context;

The third condition (c) refers to the discernment of a common space between the religions. We understand the phrase "common space" to mean

- our common living together, a sort of equivalent global village,
- the whole realm of the natural—that is, the basic life and needs of human beings;
- a space and place where we can mutually deal with and strive to eliminate human problems; and
- the whole realm of common moral and spiritual ideas.

However, we were not persuaded that these three conditions convey the full picture. We spoke of two other conditions. The first is the factor of God's desire, as expressed in Christ's commands; in fact the whole biblical idea of command, and the commands that particularly occurred to us in relation to people of other faiths were the following:

- to love people,
- to love justice,
- to be doers of the word and not hearers only,
- to be examples as good followers,
- to carry out God's mission.

We viewed the realm of command in the light of Christ's word "a new commandment give I to you," and the spontaneity of our grateful response as a forgiven sinner and a loved child of God. "Even as . . . so send I you."

The other condition that we felt was important to include grew out of the previous point, and that is the recognition of what we have become in Christ, a new creation; as salt, leaven and light we witness in the world through the Christian life. We are not only sent to witness, but we *are* witnesses.

We also looked at the phrase "mission and evangelism" in the first paragraph. There are two problems with this phrase. The first has to do with the word "mission" and the misunderstanding, related to the past, that the word raises in the feelings of people of other faiths. We do not suggest abandoning the word, but note that the term witness is in general much more positively received.

We do not think that the terms evangelism and mission should be put in parallel for two reasons: (i) evangelism is part of mission, and (ii) evangelism should be coupled with the term service. Evangelism and service taken together constitute one's witness among people of other faiths, and it is our missionary task to assure that they happen.

In the third paragraph, it is said that we meet our neighbor without preconditions. We understand that to mean: we accept each other as we are. The second sentence, "willing to relate," is to be understood as the willingness to listen as well as to communicate. This last sentence in fact suggests that there is a precondition to my relationship with the neighbor, i.e., the principle that I must not violate fundamental commitments. We agree, but in rewriting suggest that the apparent contradiction between the first and last sentence be eliminated. We understand "fundamental commitments" to mean strictly my faith commitment, and not anything that falls in the realm of unhealthy prejudice.

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The fourth paragraph identifies four levels at which to deal with people of other faiths, namely:

- getting to know them,
- seeking mutual understanding,
- acting in common for the good of all,
- genuinely sharing convictions.

We would like to identify three more levels. The first is to meet the felt needs of our neighbor. It is not my need that Muslims own property for building a mosque, but it is a felt need of Muslims, and we should help them. The second is to respect our neighbor. The whole level of respect must be lived in a world that engages in mutual distortion. And finally, and most profoundly, the willingness to suffer for our friends. "Greater love has no person than this, to give up one's life for one's friend . . ." that word ultimately defines the Christian understanding of friendship which, when followed, will profoundly reshape relationships.

To that end we also make the general, linguistic point that, wherever possible, rather than the term "religions," terms such as "religious people," "people of other faiths," "believers," and so on, be used. This helps us preserve the sense of our common humanity, rather than designating us as representatives of static systems.

To the phrase "an essential goal is that there be full mutuality" (in the fifth paragraph), in speaking of the Christian approach, we should not give the sense that we will not be satisfied unless the other extends full mutuality. Friendship does not demand equality of treatment, but is self-giving. We hope that on the Christian side, the principle of self-giving love dominates, as we recognize that even when we were sinners Christ died for us.

To the members of our group the language of big and little conversion is interesting, but we feel it creates some confusion, does not represent the New Testament idea of conversion fully, and is not sufficiently differentiated. There are, for example, many people in the world today who are following Jesus Christ, having converted to God in Christ, without formally shifting religious allegiance. When the Lord coupled change of mind with repentance, he introduced this powerful element into the realm of conversion; it is this idea that must be retained here.

At the end of the fifth paragraph, Prof. Martinson speaks of the undeniable dark underside of the religions. We suggest that in any re-writing, the elements of sin, darkness, and evil that grasp religions, including Christianity, be emphasized more strongly. In engagement with religious people we must demonstrate the willingness to discuss human suffering and its causes, and to work earnestly together to overcome evil and suffering wherever we can.

In the last paragraph, we suggest the elimination of the fourth sentence, which defines evangelism as public offer, and dialogue as public reasoning. This sets up an apparent dichotomy. As this paragraph itself suggests, a dialogical relation certainly includes sharing—preferably sharing, not offer—a sharing of the good news; and good evangelism comprises the element of reasoned presentation.

Our group did not try to add materials from our own perspective to this eminently instructive paper. Method was not heavily addressed in this section, even though it is in the title. The elements of Christian presence and Christian living could be taken up in a fuller presentation. Our Christian relation with other people is our method, and simply, it

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must represent the spirit of Christ. We noted the division in contemporary Protestantism between the camps who espouse evangelism, and those who espouse dialogue. True methodology avoids false alternatives, and a good Lutheran Christian theology of religions can build bridges between the so-called evangelists and the so-called dialogists. Finally, we affirm that in human relationships as well as in the divine-human relationship it is the gospel of forgiving love that is the power leading to salvation. Both among ourselves and in relation to people of other faiths we play the role of reconciling ambassadors and peace-makers, and are witnesses to forgiving love.

RESPONSE TO GROUP V

Paul V. Martinson

I wish to express my appreciation to group V for their careful response. It is not often that what one says or writes is taken with that degree of seriousness. Their response was in many ways very generous.

My return response can be quite brief. By and large I do not think there are very great differences. Basically some fine tuning is suggested. Some of the difficulty is that the comments had to be very concise, given the ground I was asked to cover in the specified time. Many of the points have been expanded elsewhere in my writing. As for the points made, with some I agree without ado; some others may involve semantics; yet others may involve preferences in how to put a matter; maybe at some level there may also be a theological issue at stake.

In amplifying what I might have meant by the "conditions" the response was clear, concise and correct. I happily accept the interpretations. I am not so sure, however, that the comments on "commands" really qualify as an additional condition. I take it as an amplification of the first condition. At issue, in the conditions I identify, is not whether or not God has commanded, but whether or not God's command, or promise, or gift, or desire, or love, or whatever is a truly efficacious reality and efficacious for all for whom it is intended. Unless one accepts the efficacy of God's

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commanding, there is no point in talking about command. The first condition is a general principle concerning the Christian estimation of the life-death-resurrection of Jesus; the issue of command is a concrete instance of that which the Christian believes has efficacy. Without that faith, what's the point?

Neither do I think the recognition of what we have become in Christ adds a new condition. It too amplifies the first. If God's relationship with us has efficacy, would that not include our being made in Christ a new creation, our becoming salt, leaven and light? Again, these are specific instances of the general principle.

Concerning the anxiety about the word "mission," I think I share the concern about the word, but am not sure the word witness can carry the theological weight of the word mission. Sometimes we are condemned to use imperfect language. Behind the use of the word "mission" in English (passed on to us via the Latin *missio*) is the biblical language of *apostello*, *pempo*, and the like. Mission carries the weight of the idea of being sent—authorization. Witness does not. A witness can be self-designated. We are not talking about that.

The comments on evangelism and service as a pair, I believe, is well taken. I gladly accept the modification.

Concerning the third paragraph, I don't think there is a contradiction between the first and last sentences. The first sentence speaks of the Christian not imposing preconditions. The last sentence speaks of accepting preconditions that the neighbor might feel inclined to impose upon us or the situation. These we accept. Maybe it helps to note a distinction between conditions (identified in the first paragraph), which includes dialogue taking place within a

setting where one's integrity is not bartered away, and preconditions, which refers to other kinds of limits beyond the first three conditions that might be placed upon the relationship.

Regarding the four levels, I take meeting the felt needs of our neighbor to be a specific instance of acting in the common good. As to respect for neighbor, I take that to be inherent in seeking mutual understanding. I wish to specify categorical, formal levels, not present a material listing. The third suggestion, that of willingness to suffer for our friends, I do embrace as a new category. Let it be the fifth.

Perhaps the problem with the word conversion is that it is being used in a double sense. When used of the Christian (big, i.e., coming to faith in Jesus Christ; little, the daily dying in baptism that Luther speaks of), its sense is theological, precisely as the responders speak of it. When used of the Buddhist (big, i.e., a Christian turns from faith in Jesus to a Buddhist conviction; little, a Buddhist gains new insight, etc. in her own Buddhist terms) it is used in a generic sense. Perhaps one should use the expression "big and little change" instead. I still prefer "conversion," since it does pick up a theological bite. As for the question about "formally shifting religious allegiance," I think there is a clear misunderstanding in meaning. I did not speak of some "formal" shift, if by that is meant adherence to a different sociological entity (church rather than *umma*, for instance). It seems to me that for a Hindu or a Muslim to become a follower of Jesus Christ, having converted to God in Christ, is a pretty good definition of "shifting religious allegiance." My allegiance (a pretty strong word), for instance, is not to the Lutheran church as such. My allegiance is to Jesus Christ. Now, is baptism an integral part of such "allegiance?" That is the

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question that lurks behind the matter brought up. We can leave that open for further discussion. In any case, baptism itself is properly not a sociological matter (as Muslims or Hindus see it), but theological. I was not baptized into the Lutheran Church, even if a Lutheran pastor baptized me. I always thought I was baptized into Jesus Christ, even by a Lutheran!

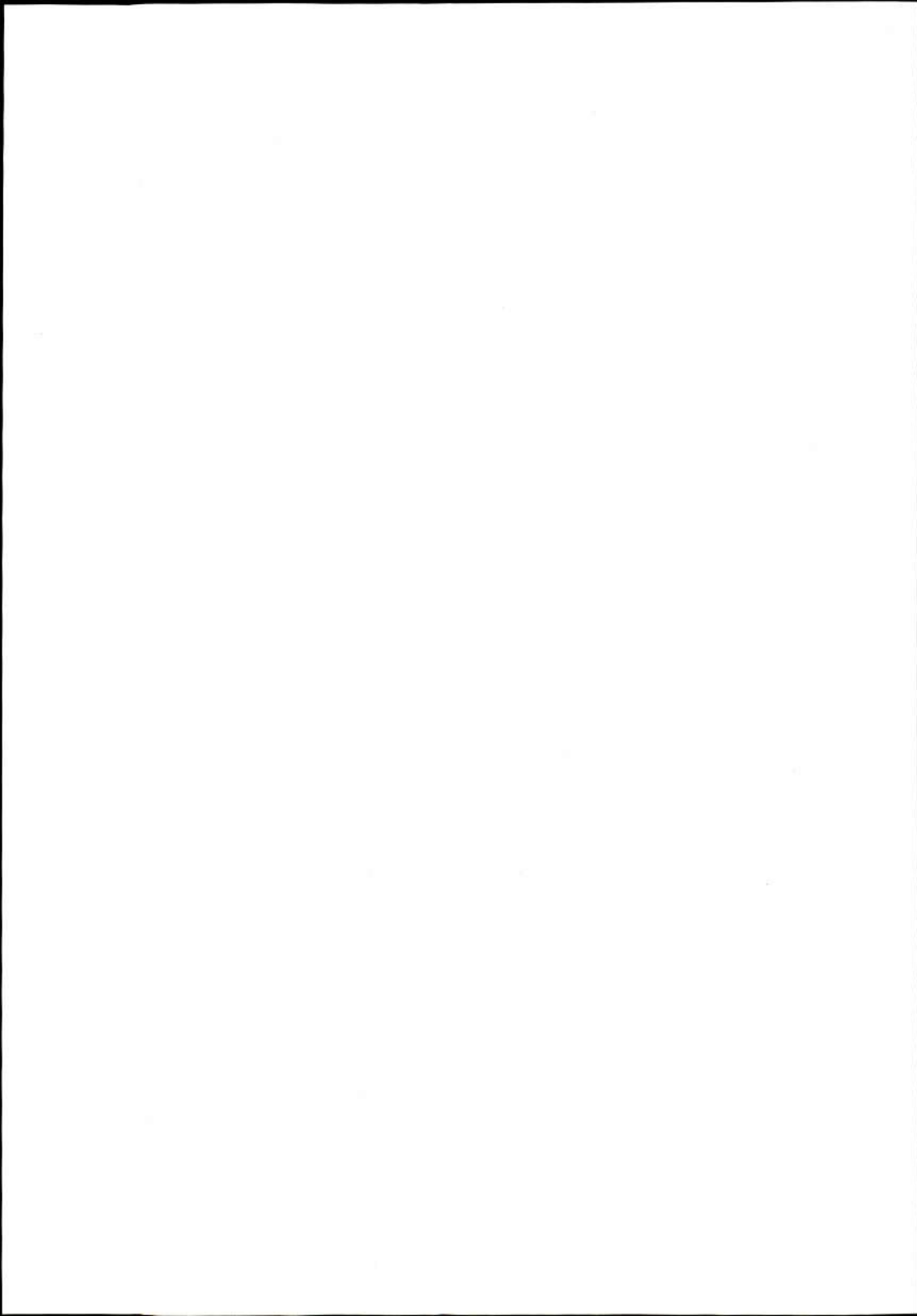
Concerning the question of the dark underside. My reference here is not to "human suffering" in general, which I take to be what the last sentence refers to. I am speaking specifically of the evil that religious people and institutions do in the name of their religion, or faith, or commitment—"the elements of sin, darkness, and evil that grasp religions," in the responders' words. Yes, it needs frank and open discussion. "In this sign (the cross) conquer," and then chop off the head of an infidel! I refer to this kind of dark underside, most of which is less virile in form. It is the *simul justus et peccator* [justified and sinner at the same time] of Luther applied to both individuals as well as institutions.

I do not accept the suggestion concerning the last paragraph. Obviously, these two modes are interactive—that is why they are modes. Dialogue arises because people ask questions, propose contrary or divergent faiths, or just plain disagree. To the degree that one uses reason well, it is dialogue; to the degree that the gospel invitation is shared, it is evangelism. Reason may help in conveying the gospel, but the reasoning itself is not evangelism. *Euangelizo* has to do with announcement, proclamation, *kerygma*. To distinguish is not to separate. As for the worry about the word "offer" and the substitute of the word "sharing," I do not agree. "Offer" may not be the best word, but "sharing" doesn't carry the freight. Evangelism may take the method

of sharing, but it is the invitation (the announcement, the proclamation) to faith in Jesus Christ who loves and forgives and bears our burdens, whether implicit or explicit, that makes evangelism evangelism. One does something with the words one speaks in sharing the gospel. Promises, invitations, offerings are there, certainly implied, possibly explicit. I am concerned about the illocutionary (not locutionary) character of the speech.

In the final paragraph of the response the issue of method was touched on. The suggestion is that "elements of Christian presence and Christian living" could be taken up more. Paragraph four is about method. The suggestion that the responders made to add a yet more profound level, that of suffering love, I take to be at the heart of the Christian presence and living of which they speak. I think we agree that this is our method.

Thanks again.



REPORT OF GROUP VI

IDENTITY AND ENRICHMENT FROM THE RELIGIONS

*Can Christian theology give a positive role to the ancestors?
How?*

Ancestor worship is present in all cultures in some form or other, although its accompanying manifestations, beliefs, customs and rituals may vary. The Bible describes God as the God of the living and the dead. When Jesus referred to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he also pointed to our connection with the dead. They are not merely "dead" figures, but they are "living dead." St Paul further says "that neither death, nor life . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). In this sense the dead remain in our memory. By remembering them, we renew our memories of our loved ones, which evoke in us a sense of gratitude, affection, love and respect. The fifth commandment to "honor your father and your mother" extends beyond the boundaries of death.

However, Christians differ on how the ancestors should be remembered. For some, ancestors, as long as they are not deified, can be remembered with love and respect. The Chinese believe that people who enter the realm of the dead become hungry and begin to roam as spirits. Therefore, the dead have to be offered food. May Christians participate in such a ritual? In certain Reformed Churches in Switzerland

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the coffin of the dead person is kept at the entrance of the church, because it is feared that inside it could become an object of veneration.

In the Christian tradition, knowingly or unknowingly, people pay homage to the ancestors. Placing flowers and lighted candles on the burial site at Christmas and during other festive seasons is not very different from the ways other traditions remember their ancestors.

In remembering the dead, the living find also comfort and consolation. A spiritual, emotional and psychological need is fulfilled. Remembering helps to complete the grieving process or the unfinished agenda with the ancestors, and thus to become reconciled to them. There are stories of men and women who installed their dead spouses at the dinner table or in the living room. For them, the living dead became a living presence.

Can we pray to the dead? Ninety percent of the prayers collected from among African Religions do not mention the dead at all. The rest of the prayers are asking favors from God through the mediation of ancestors. One of the issues the group has struggled with is whether it is appropriate to offer our prayers to God through the mediation of our own¹ ancestral saints, who are aware of our needs even before we ask, rather than through certain unknown European saints, who may not even have existed.

People in the West, where the ancestors are often forgotten, have much to learn from these customs, which strengthen family bonds in life and in death and create a deeper respect for life.

The group also pointed out certain practices that are not consistent with the Christian faith. Some of the irrational

beliefs prevalent among ancestor worshipers are, for instance, the one in divination through the medium of ancestors, and the fear that the ancestors will harm the living unless food and other necessities are offered.

How might Christians deal with the dual cultural– religious inheritance?

In the Afro–Asian context religion and culture cannot be separated. They are intertwined. One cannot pick certain elements from a culture and at the same time ignore the religion which has shaped it. Both indigenization and inculturation have limitations for Christian mission. Christianity in its present form is perceived as an alien religion on the Afro–Asian soil. Christians are looked upon as outsiders, filled with Western culture.

Therefore the question is how to become authentic Christians, faithful to the gospel, and at the same time remain faithful to one's religio–cultural inheritance. For Asians, the need today is to be Asian Christians and to cease to be Western Christians in their witness. Most Christians are comfortable with cultural adaptation, but have reservations about how to deal with their religious inheritance. They are still reluctant to place Jesus on a par with other savior figures. For them, the uniqueness of Jesus means that he stands above other savior figures. As long as Jesus is introduced as a competitor—that is what Western missionaries have done for five centuries—he will continue to remain an alien, and Christianity will remain a minority religion.

Like Jesus, who was bold enough to undergo baptism by John in the river Jordan, Christians need to be “baptized” in the

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Jordan of Asian religions. Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, gladly and willingly entered into the religio-cultural stream of his people. He taught, preached, and exercised his ministry within this *dual* inheritance. For the group this is exemplary and it therefore emphasizes the importance of taking local theologies seriously and to do away with the academic, intellectual and abstract theology of the West. A theology that takes incarnation seriously, that emerges from people's life experiences and their particular contexts, is the only authentic one; it is a theology that will take people's religio-cultural inheritance seriously. Thus, theologies such as Dalit theology have given an identity to the poor and the oppressed and enabled them to reclaim their cultural-religious inheritance.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to exercise one's Christian vocation without dealing with one's religio-cultural inheritance, as many examples show. This is especially true for Christian politicians required to participate in religious ceremonies of people of other faiths. In Sri Lanka, for instance, politicians are often invited to participate in Buddhist functions. Sometimes they are even called upon to carry the relics of the Lord Buddha to a Buddhist temple in their constituency. If they refuse, the constituency will be unhappy. If they oblige, there will be criticism from church circles. Little conversions are necessary in certain instances.

In what ways have we been enriched through our relationships with people of other faiths? Can we learn something about devotion, piety, and spirituality from people of other faiths?

The group noted that these two issues divide Christians into two camps. While some concede a salvific value to

other faiths, others do not see them within God's purposes of salvation. Hence the basic difficulty of being enriched through our encounters with people of other faiths. In certain Christian circles, other faiths are still perceived as religions that must be overthrown and replaced with the only true religion, namely Christianity.

On the other hand, many Christians have gained a deeper understanding of their own faith by encountering people of other religious traditions. They have learned how to apply the insights and spiritual resources of the Christian faith on the pilgrimage of life. For them, faith is not a cause for division, but a reason for unity, for journeying together. Such encounters constantly remind us of our roots, of our history and our religio-cultural heritage. They challenge us to accept and appreciate the truths that may be found in other faiths. They enable us to see that other savior figures are also within God's salvific plan, and that God has spoken to humankind in many and diverse ways. Our relationships with people of other faiths have often drawn us together to act jointly—to take a stand against some of the social evils in our societies.

In the gospels, Jesus commended the faith of the Samaritans on many occasions. The devotion, piety and spirituality of people of other religious traditions often put Christians to shame. Christians sometimes worship with the intellect only, forgetting that they also have a heart. The Hindus who bathe in the river Ganges, the Muslims who faithfully keep to their prayer times wherever they happen to be, the Buddhists who climb four thousand feet to venerate the footprints of the Lord Buddha remind Christians of the deep religiosity of people of other faiths.

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It is obvious that many Christians are unwilling to worship in indigenous forms. They find it difficult to break away from their Western ways of worship. Indigenous forms are considered Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, only Western forms of worship are considered to be Christian. In other religious traditions, some new movements have emerged, such as the one of "Socially Engaged Buddhists." Worship and spirituality lead to action even in other faiths.

NOTE

- ¹ Group VI was composed of people from Africa, Asia and Latin America (editor's note).

REPORT OF THE CONSULTATION ON THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON OTHER FAITHS

Bangkok, 10 – 13 July 1996

Dr Viggo Mortensen, the director of the Department for Theology and Studies, recapitulated the study program on "Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths." He began with a brief survey of the events and challenges that led to the recognition of the need for such a program and posed a few questions for the group to consider. Some of the more important questions were: How do we live out the missionary mandate found in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18ff.) in the context of a multireligious and multicultural global reality? How are we to respond to this reality? How do we work towards the establishment of peace in a world that is divided on racial, ethnic and religious lines? Does Lutheranism have anything special to contribute to the area of interfaith dialogue?

Dr Mortensen stressed the importance of gaining more knowledge about one's own religious belief and a *conviction* that one's own religion is true alongside a "will to affirm the right to exist of other religions" in order to be able to contribute to a meaningful dialogue and a climate of tolerance. Dr Mortensen also emphasized that dialogue must not be considered as a substitute for evangelism; but rather as a form of mission, a method that could be used to address some of the more pressing issues in today's world.

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In his opening address, Dr Hance Mwakabana considered the "Consultation on Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths (Bangkok, 10–13 July 1996) as the *culmination* of what the five working groups had been working on for the last three years. He expressed satisfaction with the performance of the various groups which had so far been operating under the guidelines set by the study program, and he thanked all parties concerned for their good efforts. He was, however, quick to remind the Consultation that the materials gathered so far did not in themselves constitute a "theology of religions" as such. They only provided us with valuable sources for developing a theology of religions, and the Bangkok Consultation was designed as a further step towards such a long-term goal. Dr Mwakabana did not want the gathering to forget that the whole exercise was being carried out from a *Christian* perspective with Lutheran distinctives, although such emphasis would have to be viewed in a much larger ecumenical context. The involvement of members from non-Lutheran constituencies was in fact a very concrete attempt to make quite sure that the final outcome of the whole exercise would not be an exclusively Lutheran theology of religions but hopefully an authentically Christian/Lutheran one.

Following Dr Mwakabana's remarks, there was brief discussion about the lack of a study group representing Christian relations with the Jews. The opinion was expressed that considerations of relations with Jewish people should be included in this theological consultation on other faiths. It was pointed out that the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was dealing with relations with the Jews in a different way. The theological dialogue with the Jews is already well advanced; it pertains to both the desk for Church and

Report of the Consultation

People of Other Faiths and the desk for Theology and the Church.

With Dr Musimbi Kanyoro presiding, Dr Simon Maimela presented the summary report of the study group on African Religion.

In the plenary discussion, one topic concerned the level of involvement of Christians in the African Traditional Religion. It was pointed out that many Christians are turning to the traditional African religion for family and community needs not adequately met by Christianity. For them religion and culture cannot be separated, as evidenced particularly in the *rites of passage*. Another question concerned salvation as offered in African Religion, with reconciliation, peace, and harmony seen as expressions of salvation. The question was posed: *Is Christianity needed in Africa, or would people be better off returning to African religion?* The point was made that missionaries did not bring God to Africa, rather God brought them; and the missionaries only *named* Christ, who was already present. It was suggested that what was taking place was the incarnation of the Church in Africa.

With Dr Kyaw Than presiding, Dr Ted Ludwig presented the summary report of the study group on relations with Buddhists. In the plenary discussion that followed, it was suggested that new movements in Buddhism as well as revival movements needed to be taken note of in relating to Buddhists today. A question was raised whether the conventional wisdom that "*doctrine divides but practice unites*" really held up in interreligious relations. On the question of talking about *God* with Buddhists, it was explained, while Buddhists acknowledge gods of various sorts, they do not share the Christian idea of a *personal*,

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transcendent, creator-God. Therefore, the term “*God*” needs to be carefully used and explained in conversing with Buddhists, just as Buddhist terms need to be carefully understood.

Dr Israel Selvanayagam’s presentation “Christian Theology and Mission in the Midst of Many Theologies and Missions” could be quite adequately summed up by the following headings:

- The Challenge of Religious Pluralism
- Different Kinds of Response to Such a Challenge
- Insights from the Early Christian Approaches (based largely on the Book of Acts)
- Some Highlights and Contemporary Implications

Dr Selvanayagam’s overall position, as Dr Péri Rasolondraibe had rightly observed, was “commitment to the Christian faith with openness to other faiths.” A couple of participants in the plenary pointed out that the paper had put the stress on the gospel of the suffering and crucified Christ rather than on the whole Jesus event. In response, Dr Selvanayagam explained that such an emphasis could present a more adequate and appropriate message to people in concrete situations of suffering.

Dr Péri Rasolondraibe, in response to Dr Israel Selvanayagam’s paper, put forth a holistic view of Christian ministry, i.e., the gospel is *in* the whole life of the community. A further question concerns the fact that Christian theology of mission is typically based *not only* on the *Book of Acts*, but also on the *cosmic Christology* expressed in the Epistles.

In the plenary discussion that followed, these were the main topics discussed: Although missionaries did a lot of damage

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to indigenous cultures, they also brought the gift of additional languages which were highly appreciated in these cultures as a means for preserving culture. How can we address these concerns about mission from a *feminist* perspective? The notion of *commitment with openness* evokes the image of a deeply-rooted tree that can respond to all winds with fortitude. Since this paper seems to set limits in ecumenical dialogue, are there also limits in interreligious dialogue?¹ Selvanayagam responded that in practice there were often limits in dialogue;² yet, ideally, there should be no limits.

With Dr Paul Martinson presiding, Dr Thomas Chi-Ping Yu presented the summary report of the Confucian-Christian dialogue study group.

In the plenary discussion that followed, these were the main topics discussed. The link to the *ancestors* is very important to the Chinese, as it is in AR, where ancestors are treated in rituals as really present and active in the life of the people. The *rites controversy* in China made it difficult for Christians to participate in rituals to the ancestors; this ban has been removed for Roman Catholics only since the 1930s. It is important to highlight the status of women in the Confucian tradition; it was noted that women ancestors are treated well in the ancestral rituals. While subordination and self-sacrifice have traditionally been associated with women's roles in China, today, it is important to *reinterpret* the Five Relations in terms of *equality* and *reciprocity*. In considering Confucianism as an "inheritance" of the Chinese, the emphasis is put on *continuity* amidst change.

With Dr Kajsa Ahlstrand presiding, Dr Paul Rajashekar presented the summary report of the Hindu-Christian dialogue study group.

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A moment of silence was observed in memory of Dr Immanuel David and his family, who were killed in a tragic auto accident in July 1994.

In the plenary discussion that followed the presentation of the paper, these are the main topics discussed. The lack of interest in dialogue on the part of Hindus is frustrating, yet Christians should continue their dialogue efforts, since mission and dialogue are inseparable. It seems that Christianity would have many affinities with Bhakti Hinduism, yet most dialogue takes place with the more philosophical-minded Hindus. A possible reason for this is the fact that most of the Bhakti movements are very specific in their focus. More attention should be paid to the role of women in Hinduism, especially since much writing is being done on the Shakti tradition. It was suggested that the dialogical approach to relations with Hindus needed to be explained more. The traditional categories of *exclusivistic*, *inclusivistic*, and *pluralistic* are too limiting; dialogue is an attitude of being *both* faithful to one's own faith and open to the religious experience of others.

Dr Viggo Mortensen led a plenary discussion on a presentation to be made on interfaith dialogue at the LWF Assembly next year in Hong Kong. There will be a two-hour prime time event on this topic, with representatives from other faiths attending. It was suggested that care should be taken not to put these people from other faiths in an awkward position; it would be good to set up occasions during the Assembly for them to meet with smaller groups of delegates.

With respect to outcomes from this study project, it was suggested that theological seminaries and teachers could make use of these materials, but most of all, pastors in their

local congregations. Perhaps small booklets could be prepared, with empathetic presentations of the different traditions. It would be good to bring in the *spiritual dimensions* of the encounter with people of other faiths.

With Dr Sigvard von Sicard presiding, Dr Roland Miller presented the summary report of the study group on Islam.

The plenary discussion after the paper focused on the following topics: Why did the study group choose the area of *creation* rather than *soteriology* (salvation) as the opening basis for dialogue with Muslims? The primary reason is that the whole realm of soteriology is so burdened with historical animosity between Christians and Muslims, while creation is an area with less tension and more commonality. Questions were raised about crucial issues not addressed specifically in the paper—the status of women, slavery, oppression of children. These topics were studied in the study papers written by the study group, and they need to be given central attention in dialogue with Muslims, as Muslims also are starting to confront these issues. Dialogue with Muslims will be hard work, for currently such dialogue often takes the form of debate. We need to reshape the dialogue, although not entering it with a preconceived agenda.

With Dr Péri Rasolondraibe presiding, Dr Paul Martinson's paper "Explorations in Lutheran Perspectives on People of Other Faiths" provided the framework for the group discussions that followed. His paper highlighted six thematic sets, namely

- historical, epistemological, contextual themes,
- social and communal themes
- theology: creation, revelation

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- theology: healing, salvation, and Christology
- witness, mission, method, and
- identity and enrichment from other religions; and the ways in which Lutheran convictions interact with them.

The paper was substantial and thought-provoking, particularly because Dr Martinson illustrated and substantiated his proposals by drawing from the wealth of his own personal experience and encounter with people of other faiths and cultures.

The plenary discussion following focused on these topics:

If we say Jesus Christ is constitutive of God and of humanity, how can we also state that the relationship between Christology and the world is analogical? This needs to be considered more. The question of discerning the work of the Spirit in the world was given much attention. Only that which "*coheres*" with *Christ* can be accepted as work of the Spirit—but this means taking the whole narrative of Jesus as the general criterion. Discerning the Spirit always involves taking note of the *hiddenness of God*, so there are no easy answers. The concern was raised that the strong emphasis on the centrality of the cross might overshadow the reality of Jesus of Nazareth as the Savior. The answer is, by the cross we are to understand the whole movement of the narrative of Jesus, including his whole life, death, and resurrection.

NOTES

- ¹ Those who hold to crude forms of exclusivism are rejected.
- ² Those who insist on strict caste divisions, for example, are outside dialogue limits for some.

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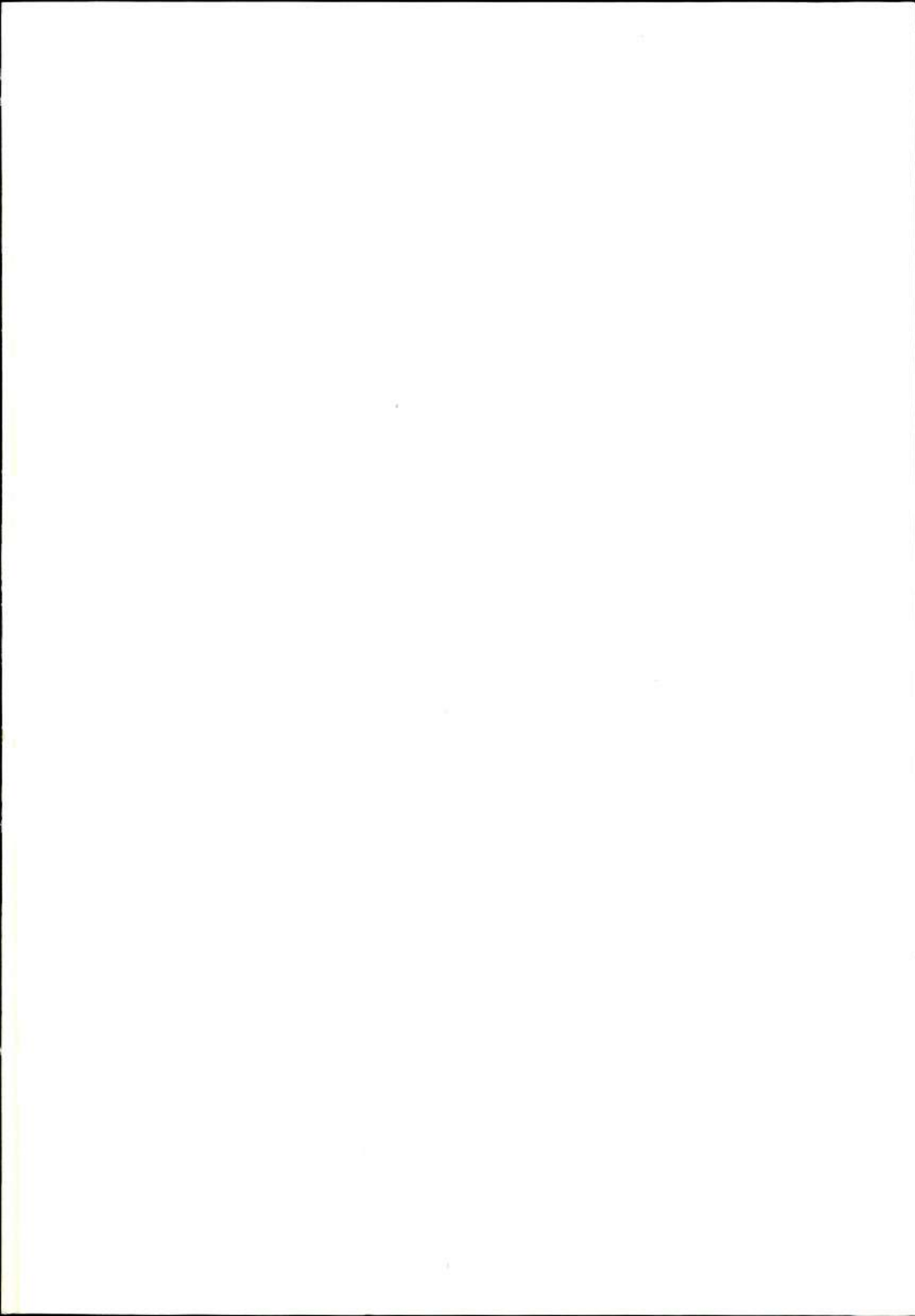
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ISSN 0174-1756
ISBN 3-906706-44-3